

My Ref: BC/JL/150
Your Ref:

Municipal Buildings
Church Road
Stockton-on-Tees
TS18 1LD
SAT NAV code: TS19 1UE

Tel: 01642 527032
Email: robert.cook@stockton.gov.uk

23 July 2014

Dear Secretary of State

Identification of sites to meet the needs of travellers in the Borough of Stockton-on-Tees

I am writing to you to seek your assistance on the issue of planning for travellers and its potential consequences for the Council's plan preparation process here in Stockton.

As a council we are committed to the plan-led system. We have an adopted Core Strategy and are progressing with a site allocations document entitled the Regeneration & Environment Local Development Document (LDD). As part of this we have undertaken an assessment of the need for traveller accommodation in the borough in accordance with the guidance contained in the National Planning Policy Framework and Planning Policy for Travellers. Our intention was to incorporate work relating to the identification of a site or sites to meet the needs of travellers within the LDD before submission for examination-in-public. However this approach is proving to be unworkable.

In the past year, we have undertaken an extensive search for suitable sites to accommodate the needs of travellers. Earlier this year, we held a public consultation on a Gypsy and Traveller Site Allocations Local Development Document in which we identified six potential sites; five owned by the Council and one privately owned site. The public consultation proved to be deeply controversial and difficult. Each of the sites proposed provoked significant opposition and at the end of the consultation, the private site was withdrawn from the process by its owners, leaving only the Council sites for consideration. Most significantly, opposition to the sites came, not just from the settled community, but also the traveller community itself. They expressed a preference for small, rural based plots which would not be considered sustainable in terms of government guidance but which would prove to be more acceptable to both communities.

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The Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP
Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government
Eland House, Bressenden Place
London
SW1E 5DU



The Government Standard

We are extremely committed to progressing the Regeneration & Environment LDD as quickly as possible because, currently, we cannot demonstrate a five year supply of housing land and as a consequence have been unable to resist a number of planning applications for large housing sites, particularly in the south of the borough, which is causing considerable disquiet with local residents. We are therefore committed to agreeing an up-to-date plan which identifies sufficient deliverable and viable housing sites to meet the objectively assessed housing requirement in the borough.

We understand that the government takes the issue of planning for travellers very seriously and requires every local authority to deal with this issue as part of its overall housing requirement. I am aware of several cases in recent years, where Planning Inspectors have felt that Councils are trying to evade the issue, of examinations-in-public being suspended under the threat of the plan being found unsound, whilst the issue is dealt with to their satisfaction.

I believe that we can demonstrate that our intention to deal with the issue of traveller accommodation is wholehearted and sincere. We have put considerable resource and effort into making progress. However the process is taking longer and proving to be more controversial than expected and we are keen not to further delay progress on the Regeneration & Environment LDD whilst we resolve this issue. Therefore I am seeking your reassurance that should Stockton-on-Tees Council press on with the submission of its Regeneration and Environment LDD later this year without the inclusion of a site or sites for traveller accommodation, the examination will not be suspended, nor the plan found unsound on these grounds. I am aware of at least one recent local plan examination (Solihull) where the inspector found the plan sound with a criteria based policy which stated that the Council would subsequently prepare a site allocations document. We already have an adopted criteria based policy and remain publicly committed to producing a separate Traveller Site Allocations LDD. I would hope that this position would prove acceptable to your inspectors and not delay the examination of the borough's Regeneration and Environment LDD.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Bob Cook
Leader of the Council