

SUBMISSION TO THE NEWPORT LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN EXAMINATION

I make this submission on behalf of the **Newport Traveller Sites Study Group**, a charity set up to study Newport City Council's proposals for traveller sites and ascertain whether those sites are beneficial to Newport residents, including travellers.

The starting point is acceptance of the need for residential and transit traveller sites and regret that NCC failed to tackle this problem earlier. It is however, essential that such sites are carefully selected in the interests of Newport residents, including travellers.

I should make my position clear. I have to declare a personal interest as I live off Hartridge Farm Road along the lane from a proposed residential site. I would, however, object to this site even if I lived the other side of town. It is manifestly unsuitable.

I served as a member of NCC for eight years and for most of the time I was virtually a lone voice advocating the provision of traveller sites. I argued that the only solution to the very real, continuing problem of illegal sites was the provision of properly run legal sites. My assertion was greeted with derision by both main parties on the Council with support coming only from some of my Liberal Democrat colleagues.

As Cabinet Member for Education I persuaded Cabinet to arrange prudential borrowing towards the £29m cost of replacing the dilapidated and unpopular Hartridge High School with the state of the art Llanwern High School. This was on the understanding that the Hartridge Road site would be sold for housing to help recoup the cost. The estimate was between £5 & £6m with a further substantial sum from the Pwll Pen site, currently a school playing field.

When I transferred to responsibility for Social Services and Housing I became involved in the selection of the final five sites for traveller camps. This was a long and thoughtful process starting with 240 sites and involving the planning department, the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Members for Resources and Housing. The suggestion that the selection of the final five sites was a "back of an envelope job on a wet Wednesday afternoon" is insulting. The five final sites were fully endorsed by the planners who, incidentally, strongly advised against the Hartridge Road and Ringland Allotment sites as unsuitable.

The final five potential sites were selected with no political considerations, nor of the wards involved; they were the most suitable or least unsuitable sites. No site was perfect and we knew there would be objections whichever were proposed. I attended a standing room only meeting at Nash Community Hall and when I was asked why the two Nash sites were picked on I replied that when all the other sites were eliminated the five were what we were left with.

As a result of the Study Group's deliberations we submitted formal objections to the Ringland Allotments and Hartridge Farm Road sites but unlike other objectors we also submitted an alternative strategy. Our submission was formally acknowledged but no comments on our proposals have been received. Our Study and proposals didn't merit a mention in the Council debate, although our suggestion that the Council should engage in conversations with neighbouring Local Authorities for a joint transit site along the M4 corridor was raised, without acknowledgement. Our specific suggestion for a transit site was the former service station on the A449.

We endorsed the submissions made by the Ringland Matters Group, on behalf of the residents who provided over 11,000 signatures on the two petitions opposing the Ringland Allotments and Hartridge Farm Road sites, and the Report compiled by the consultants, the Musker Sumner Partnership, engaged by the Ringland Matters Group. In particular we called for the deletion of ~

RAS(D)026 Ringland Allotments Briefly, it is unsuitable as it is alongside the busy SDR on a main access to the city, immediately opposite a large housing estate. All amenities are across that dual carriage road and people have always been nervous about using the underpass. The site has a power line crossing it and road access for a large housing development is planned adjacent to it.

And RAS(D)025 Land at Hartridge Farm Road. Briefly, using that site would undermine both the financial and educational strategies of the Council. It was intended that the land should be sold for housing to partly offset the £29m cost of Llanwern High School, most of which had to be borrowed.

That investment was made to transform the attractiveness of Llanwern High School as opposed to the old, crumbling and unpopular Hartridge High School. The reputation of the old School was such that parents looked for alternatives. The aim was to balance secondary education in the east of the city by taking pressure off the seriously oversubscribed St Julian's and Caerleon schools, where the quality of education was affected by over crowding. As a governor of two Junior Schools in the Hartridge catchment areas I was acutely aware that, if parents were told St Julian's and Caerleon were full, they turned to Caldicot, Chepstow and private schools.

The new Llanwern School has turned the situation round. The transformation is remarkable. The new buildings and superb facilities have improved the morale of the staff and the attitude of pupils, who are now smartly dressed in uniform they have chosen and proud of their school. There has been a marked improvement in appearance, attendance and exam results, leading to improved recruitment. The school was built with a capacity for the planned housing developments at Hartridge, Pwll Pen and Llanwern. If those developments do not proceed, or parents send their children elsewhere, the splendid and expensive new school risks becoming a white elephant.

A traveller site would have a detrimental affect on both Llanwern High and Ysgol Gymraeg Casnewydd, which is just a road width away. We are not concerned about traveller children in the schools but the affect of a traveller site on the schools' doorstep on the willingness of parents to send their children there.

Likewise, the potentially valuable Pwll Pen site would become unattractive to developers and purchasers. That site was supposed to be for houses "to match the hamlet of Pwll Pen". Who is going to build and buy four bedroom, detached, Band G houses if there is a traveller site on the doorstep?

There would be a similarly detrimental affect on the residents of Hartridge Farm Road, which Mrs Pile eloquently outlines. The dozen households of Hartridge and Pwll Pen would be completely overwhelmed by a traveller site, against Welsh Government guide lines and common sense.

The RSPCA animal shelter could not continue its highly valued work with a traveller site next door. The shelter's dogs and those of the travellers would set each other off. Consequently neither the animals, nor residents nor travellers would have any peace. Likewise, the RSPCA would not allow its staff and volunteer dog walkers to exercise nervous and damaged dogs past the traveller site. The shelter would have to move but there is no funding or provision in the LDP for this.

The same is true of the Road Safety Centre which does vital work with youngsters who could be a menace on the roads. Road Safety lessons are a valuable part of the curriculum of difficult to educate pupils at the High School. They can walk to the Centre and bussing them elsewhere would put a continuing drain on scarce school resources. Again, no provision for funding or re-location is made in the LDP.

The policy of concentrating traveller families is flawed. Lumping three separate families of different traditions together is against WG guidelines and common sense. It is asking for trouble. Travellers have talked of a "concentration camp" and a "ghetto". A leading councillor who was involved in devising this policy spoke in Council of "putting all the travellers together for ease of control and preventing the pain spreading to other areas". We suggest that smaller units spread across the community makes far more sense.

We conclude that, in undermining its own financial and education strategies, contradicting Welsh Government guidelines and rejecting more suitable sites, particularly the former Speedway site, the Council's Traveller Sites Strategy is flawed and therefore its LDP is unsound.

Alternative strategy

As a result of our study we would presume to suggest the following strategy.

The traveller family at the long established Goldcliff site RAS(N) 051 should be allowed to stay there. It appears that no thought was given to allowing travellers to stay where they have become established, as recommended by WG guidelines.

Every effort should be made to persuade the objectors to the Transporter Bridge site to withdraw their objections, bearing in mind that over several years there have been no problems with the site. If no way can be found for the family at the Transporter Bridge site to remain undisturbed they should be relocated at the Tatton Road site RAS(N)037. Being a small family they could be located away from the power line.

The larger family at Tatton Road should be relocated at the former Speedway site RAS(N)009 which currently has no LDP allocation, and, not having been in the previous administration's list, is politically neutral. It was still being used for speedway when the original shortlist was drawn up. Being at the end of a cul de sac it would disturb no one and is favoured by the police. It is also strongly favoured by the travellers who don't want to be right alongside residents and schools. We dispute that the travellers favour Hartridge Farm Road; we understand that they were told it was either that site or individual families would be split up on smaller sites. They wanted the three separate families to be separated but not individual families split up.

If the proposed sites do not find favour there are alternatives each side of the river, or, as suggested above, the sites where they are presently settled should be considered for development.

As far as a transit site is concerned we suggest Newport City Council should engage in conversations with neighbouring Local Authorities for a joint site along the M4 corridor. In particular, we suggest talks with Monmouthshire with regard to the former service station on the A449.

The Study Group hopes these suggestions are helpful.

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NCC Councillor 2004-2012

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On behalf of the Newport Traveller Sites Study Group