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Cabinet Member for Jobs and Regeneration

25 November 2020

**Name of Cabinet Member:**

Cabinet Member for Jobs and Regeneration – Councillor J O’Boyle

**Director Approving Submission of the report:**

Director of Property Services and Development

**Ward(s) affected:**

Cheylesmore

**Title:**

Redevelopment of Siskin Drive Traveller Site

**Is this a key decision?**

No

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**Executive Summary:**

Siskin Drive Traveller site, which is an allocated Traveller Site in the Coventry Local Plan, is currently vacant. The site is in poor condition and requires redevelopment. Homes England have recently advised that there is a new Traveller specific grant funding available to assist with the development of permanent Traveller sites.

Following consideration around the delivery options available this report is recommending the Council works with a registered provider – Rooftop Housing Group to redevelop the site to provide 12 permanent pitches in line with an agreed design criteria. Subject to obtaining grant funding & planning consent the Council would grant a long leasehold interest to Rooftop Housing Group to construct and manage the Traveller site.

The purpose of this report is to seek approval to conclude terms with Rooftop Housing Group for the grant of the long lease to enable them, (subject to confirmation of funding, planning consent and Board approval) to redevelop the site for permanent pitches for Traveller families.

**Recommendations:**

The Cabinet Member for Jobs and Regeneration is recommended to:

1. Approve the proposal for redevelopment of Siskin Drive Traveller site to provide 12 permanent pitches.
2. Delegate authority to the Director of Project Management and Property Services to conclude negotiations for the terms of the long lease to Rooftop Housing Group that will enable them to secure Board approval, funding and planning, facilitating the redevelopment and subsequent management of Siskin Drive Traveller Site.

**List of Appendices included:**

Appendix 1 – Location plan for Siskin Drive Traveller Site.

**Background papers:**

None

**Other useful documents**

None

**Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?**

No

**Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?**

No

**Will this report go to Council?**

No

## **Report title: Redevelopment of Siskin Drive Traveller Site**

### **1. Context (or background)**

- 1.1 The Siskin Drive Traveller site was originally established by the Council in the 1970's. The Council now has vacant possession of the site following the departure of the last remaining Traveller family. The site was left in a very poor condition. Planning policy in Coventry's Local Plan identifies the site as an allocated permanent Traveller site. Policy H7 Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation in the Coventry Plan identifies that 'provision will be made for at least 16 permanent pitches for Gypsies and Travellers through the re-modelling of the site at Siskin Drive'.
- 1.2 The identification of 16 pitches in the Local Plan was based upon the Travellers Need Assessment of 2014 which was predominantly informed by natural growth within the existing Traveller families at Siskin Drive & Burbages Lane (private site) at the time.
- 1.3 Since the 'Traveller Need's Assessment' of 2014 there have been changes to the physical requirements of Travellers pitches and changes to H & S standards, along with the view that less cramped sites provide better places to live and improve support for the families. This has meant that the number of pitches had to be reduced to comply with guidance. Travellers are now looking for sites that can accommodate larger Chalets with Utility and Kitchen / dinning accommodation blocks provided as well as parking for vehicles and a travelling caravan. To provide the new larger pitches and accommodation blocks and roadway through the site, as well as meeting the site separation fire safety regulations, requires the scheme to be reduced to 12 pitches
- 1.4 In the wider context of the 'Local Plan' the other 4 pitches identified could be delivered from private 'windfall sites' if there was further demand from the community.
- 1.5 Funding towards the costs of developing Traveller sites is available from Homes England. They have just announced their 2021 – 2025 programme of funding for affordable housing and money has been specifically identified for permanent pitches on Traveller sites as part of this main funding programme. Historically Homes England have prepaid to fund around 60 - 65% of the costs of a Traveller site development. This excludes the value of the land included therefore 35 - 40% of the costs are required to be found elsewhere.
- 1.6 There is a policy in the Local Plan for the requirement for permanent Traveller pitches across the city. If Siskin Drive is not developed as a permanent Traveller site an alternative site where permanent pitches could be developed would be required unless the Council relied on the private sector to develop permanent Traveller sites in the city.

### **2. Options considered and recommended proposal**

#### **2.1 Option 1 - The Council enters into a long leasehold interest with Rooftop Housing Group to redevelop and manage Siskin Drive Traveller site.**

The Council enters into a long lease (99yrs) with Rooftop Housing Group and they submit a bid direct to Homes England for grant funding and make the planning application for the redevelopment of the site for 12 permanent pitches in accordance with an agreed design criteria.

Rooftop Housing Group have a successful track record in securing funding and developing Traveller sites having done so in Solihull in 2016 with Solihull Borough Council. They used a modular build for the utility blocks which could be replicated on the Siskin Drive site.

A number of meetings have been held with Rooftop Housing Group and they have submitted an initial financial appraisal based on estimated costs to the Council. They have confirmed that they have internal approval to now work up detailed costings based on a design scheme and to complete a full financial appraisal. This will be the basis upon which discussions with Homes England, with regard to grant funding, will also be concluded and their final submission to their Board for approval to complete the lease. They have indicated that final sign off to their Board will be in March 2021. During this time as well as securing funding Rooftop will commit to instructing their legal team to ensure the lease documents are agreed by March 2021.

#### **Benefits of this option:**

Rooftop Housing Group have experience of developing and managing Traveller sites having a successful design for facilities along with an understanding of development costs and working with Homes England.

The Council would remain involved as land owner only with the direct responsibility for redevelopment of the site along with the financial risk of funding the development, letting of the site, management & ongoing costs of maintenance and repair passing across to Rooftop Housing Group. The site would remain as a permanent Traveller site with the 12 permanent pitches substantially meeting the citywide requirements for permanent Traveller pitches in the city as set down in policy H7 of the Local Plan.

The Council would not be required to make a capital contribution and there would be ongoing revenue savings of £33,568 for the Council as all costs and risk are passed to Rooftop

#### **Risks of this option:**

Rooftop Housing Group corporately may ultimately decide not to progress with the scheme dependant on the level of funding able to be secured from Homes England and requirements placed on the development from a planning perspective which make the delivery of the scheme financially challenging. If this happened then the Council would have to look at another option.

### **2.2 Option 2 – The Council redevelops and manages Siskin Drive Traveller Site.**

The Council would be required to make a grant application to Homes England for funding to redevelop the site. In the past Homes England have indicated that they would expect the Council to contribute a sum in the region of 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the budget cost for the scheme for grant funding to be provided.

A design specification for a 12 pitch scheme has been prepared and the cost of this scheme has been estimated at £1.6m. Based on the previous comments by Homes England the Council could be looking to contribute £640k of the total cost.

The Council would then need to apply for planning consent and procure a design & build contractor to redevelop the site.

The Council currently has a Siskin Drive Traveller Site Manager and they would manage the new site.

**Benefits of this option:**

The Council would receive the rental income from the site.

The Council would retain control of the site and who it let the pitches to.

This option would give the Council flexibility long term if the requirement/need for a permanent traveller site changed in the future.

**Risks of this option:**

Financial risk would sit with the Council. As the grant application will have to be made based on estimated costs before tenders are submitted there would be no cost certainty until the Council was in receipt of actual tender prices. There is then no opportunity to resubmit for additional grant funding from Homes England.

If the Council choose to bid for funding and chose to meet the gap from Borrowing it would cost c£28k per year over 40 year period to repay the loan.

Once developed the income risk sits with the Council to maintain a fully let site to secure the rental income to service any debt for development of the site and repair & maintenance of the site into the future.

The Council would also be required to provide day to day site management. The Council does have a current post holder who has the skills and experience to undertake this work.

**2.3 Option 3 – The site is not developed and is sold.**

The Council could make a decision not to redevelop a Traveller site at Siskin Drive and to dispose of the site.

This could be a disposal with the use controlled as a Traveller site. (We are aware that there are individuals in the Traveller community who are looking to buy sites, develop and run private facilities.)

The disposal of the site would generate a capital receipt. If we sold to a Traveller, the city would still have a Traveller site in the location, counting towards Traveller needs in the city but the Council would have no control over its letting criteria or management.

The location of the site & its proximity to industrial uses would mean that the Council could look to dispose of the site for an industrial use (subject to planning).

As there is a policy in the 'Local Plan' for the requirement for permanent Traveller pitches across the city a decision to sell the site for an alternative use would mean that the Council was expecting to either identify an alternative site where pitches could be developed, (which would be challenging) or rely on the private sector to develop permanent Traveller pitches in the city.

Disposing of the freehold interest of the site for an industrial use (if permitted) would generate a significantly higher capital receipt than if the site was sold with a restriction on use to a permanent Traveller site.

## **2.4 Option 4 – Do nothing**

The Council could continue to keep the site vacant and secure but the Council would not be providing any permanent pitches to meet the requirements of the Local Plan.

## **2.5 Option 5 – Seek another registered provider to take a lease of the Site.**

The Council did approach a number of registered providers but Rooftop Housing Group were the only organisation who expressed an interest. It is therefore very unlikely that the Council would find another organisation who wished to take on the site and would be prepared to pay a rent/premium.

## **2.6 Recommendation – Proceed with Option 1**

It is recommended that the Council proceeds by way of Option 1 and negotiates the grant of a long lease with Rooftop Housing Group.

Rooftop Housing Group have experience of both redeveloping and managing permanent Traveller sites and in granting a lease. The Council would not receive a rental income but the Council would be passing on the risk of control of gap funding and also the ongoing risk/cost of managing the site. By granting a long leasehold interest the Council would, however, still maintain some control over the ongoing use of the site and the Council would still have a permanent Traveller site in the city.

## **3. Results of consultation undertaken**

- 3.1 The Council approached a number of registered providers who are Housing Partners to see if they would be interested in working with the Council to redevelop the Siskin Drive Traveller Site and Rooftop Housing Group were the only organisation who expressed an interest

## **4. Timetable for implementing this decision**

- 4.1 Subject to Cabinet Member approval officers will conclude negotiations with Rooftop Housing Group to agree the terms of an Agreement for Lease and Lease. Rooftop Housing Group have confirmed that they would require Board approval prior to entering into an Agreement for Lease & Lease. They have committed to use internal resources and spend money on external QS and architectural consultants now to enable them to prepare the detailed financial appraisal & secure the 60 – 65% grant funding required from Homes England. In addition they will also need to prepare the planning application and legal agreements so that they would not be in a position to take a report to their Board until March 2021 for their final sign off. The Lease would be granted once Rooftop Housing Group had secured planning consent and all funding (including a grant from Homes England). The first pitches could potentially be available in mid 2022 assuming 3 months to confirm planning and 9 months to build the 12 pitches.

## **5. Comments from Director of Finance and Director of Law and Governance**

### **5.1 Financial implications**

Based on current rents being achieved on Traveller sites it is anticipated that a new site could potentially generate rents of £95 per week per pitch which would give a potential gross income of approx. £59k for 12 pitches (assuming 100% occupancy), although this would need to be netted down to take account of R & M, finance & management costs.

If the preferred option is accepted the Council will save £33,568 in revenue funding and no capital contribution will be required.

If Rooftop take on the management of the Siskin Drive Travellers site it will be cost neutral to the City Council, compared to a cost of £40,000 (including the cost to borrow the additional capital) for the Council to run the site.

If Rooftop Housing Group decided not to proceed then the Council would have to consider Option 2 if it wanted to continue to have a permanent Traveller site at Siskin Drive and also control over use. If the Council redeveloped the site gap funding would be required for the difference between the total redevelopment cost and the grant funding given. Officers have looked again at the specification for a 12 pitch scheme and the cost of this scheme has been estimated by a Q.S at £1.6m. Based on the previous comments by Homes England the Council would be looking to contribute in the region of £640k of the total cost. The business case for the gap funding would be the future net rental income that the site could achieve.

Rooftop Housing Group have indicated that the site could not be placed on charge with funders and therefore the level of loan finance would have to be kept to a minimum and/or repaid as soon as possible. Any profit (net income less loan repayment) would have to be targeted at repaying loan finance. On this basis Rooftop Housing Group have confirmed that they would not be in a position to pay the Council any rent or a premium under the terms of the lease. From an initial financial appraisal based on estimated costs Rooftop Housing Group have anticipated a net income in the region of £38k per annum and indicated that they would be seeking a grant from H.E of £820k leaving a loan requirement of £548k. Rooftop Housing Group now have internal approval to undertake a costing exercise of an indicative scheme and they will then feed this in to their financial appraisal. This will then enable them to open discussions with Homes England around the level of grant funding.

## **5.2 Legal implications**

The Council has powers under Sections 123 and 127 of the Local Government Act 1972 to dispose of land in any manner they wish, including sale of their freehold interest, granting a lease or assigning any unexpired term on a lease and granting of easements. The only restriction is that a disposal must be for the best consideration reasonably obtained otherwise consent is required from the Secretary of State.

On 4 August 2003, the Government launched the General Disposal Consent 2003 ("the Consent Order"). This allows the Council to sell land, in certain circumstances, for less than its market value without having to obtain consent from the Secretary of State for any disposal of land where the purpose for which the land is to be disposed is likely to contribute to the achievement of the economic, environmental and/or social wellbeing of its residents together with the difference between the unrestricted value of the interest to be disposed and the consideration accepted being £2m or less. This is known as "an undervalue".

The Council approached a number of registered providers to seek expressions of interest for the redevelopment of Siskin Drive Traveller Site but Rooftop Housing Group were the only provider who came back and expressed an interest. Officers have therefore entered into direct negotiations with Rooftop Housing Group.

A Legal Officer has been instructed to draft an Agreement for Lease (upon grant of Council authority) with Rooftop Housing Group. The Council shall grant a lease to Rooftop Housing Group conditional on planning permission consent and secured funding.

## **6. Other implications**

Any other specific implications

### **6.1 How will this contribute to the Council Plan ([www.coventry.gov.uk/councilplan/](http://www.coventry.gov.uk/councilplan/))?**

The redevelopment of 12 new permanent Traveller pitches at Siskin Drive will contribute to the Council Plan by improving the supply, choice and quality of housing.

### **6.2 How is risk being managed?**

The risks have been identified in paragraph 2 which considers the benefits and risks of each option.

### **6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?**

The 'Siskin Drive Traveller Site Manager' post is a part time post (12.5 hours) and the current post holder has been in place since the post was created in May 2013  
A consultation process will be required if the post is deleted or if TUPE applies.

### **6.4 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)**

An Equality Impact Assessment has not been undertaken as the site would continue as a permanent site for Travellers.

### **6.5 Implications for (or impact on) climate change and the environment**

There are no implications or impacts on climate change. The site is currently vacant and in poor condition. Redevelopment of the site will provide a brand new purpose built Traveller site which will be an improvement to the environment.

### **6.6 Implications for partner organisations?**

There are no implications for any partner organisations.

## **Report author(s):**

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