

The Stables & Greenacres Gypsy and Traveller sites Consultation Report

1. Purpose of consultation

Central Bedfordshire has 40 gypsy and traveller sites, some of which are owned and managed by the council. The Stables and Greenacres are located in Billington, Bedfordshire and are privately owned. Currently there are issues regarding; breaches of planning permissions, absence of licensing, unsafe infrastructure, anti-social behaviour, crime and a recent history of modern day slavery.

Central Bedfordshire Council, Bedfordshire and Thames Valley Police Forces, Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Bedfordshire and Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service have all agreed to work together to develop a long-term solution to address the issues at these sites.

2. The proposals

The consultation sought feedback on two options; the first being to buy both sites and build a new council-owned site near to the current premises, the second is what is known as 'Discontinuance and Injunction'. This option involves the council removing the existing planning permissions and replacing them with new planning permissions and conditions.

The council's preferred option was to buy The Stables and Greenacres sites, along with some land as close to the existing sites as possible. The council would then build a new Gypsy and Traveller site, closing the Greenacres and the Stables sites. The new site would be owned and managed by the council, with all of the appropriate facilities like water, sewerage and electricity and any crime and anti-social behaviour would not be tolerated. This option is estimated to cost approximately £9m (this does not include the cost of officer time across a number of organisations).

The second option that was being consulted upon was the Discontinuance and Injunction option. This involves the council removing the existing planning permissions and replacing them with new planning permissions and conditions. Injunctions would then be used to remove any occupants on site who are not legally entitled to be there. The council's existing planning enforcement approach would then be used for any further breaches of conditions. This option is estimated to cost £900,000 (not including the cost of officer time across a number of organisations), however it does not address the problems with the lack of basic amenities, health & safety and safeguarding concerns.

3. The Consultation process

The consultation was made available both as an online survey and a paper questionnaire and was launched on 22nd August and concluded on 14th November.

The consultation was supported by a communications campaign which directly targeted residents of both sites and residents local to the area. The consultation was also promoted more widely in Central Bedfordshire online and through the media and was open to anyone to respond.

Activities included:

- A news release was issued to all local newspaper groups at the start of the consultation. This led to front page coverage in the local newspaper and interviews on local BBC radio.
- Social media was used to promote the consultation
- Email bulletins were issued encouraging people signed up for Central Bedfordshire news to take part in the consultation.
- It was promoted to staff, members and town and parish councils through council newsletters.
- Letters and paper copies were delivered to The Stables & Greenacres residents.
- Billington Parish Council made paper copies widely available to the local community.
- A phonenumber was setup to allow site residents to phone in and discuss the proposals and raise any further questions they may have about the consultation.
- A meeting was held between residents of the sites and council officers to discuss the proposals

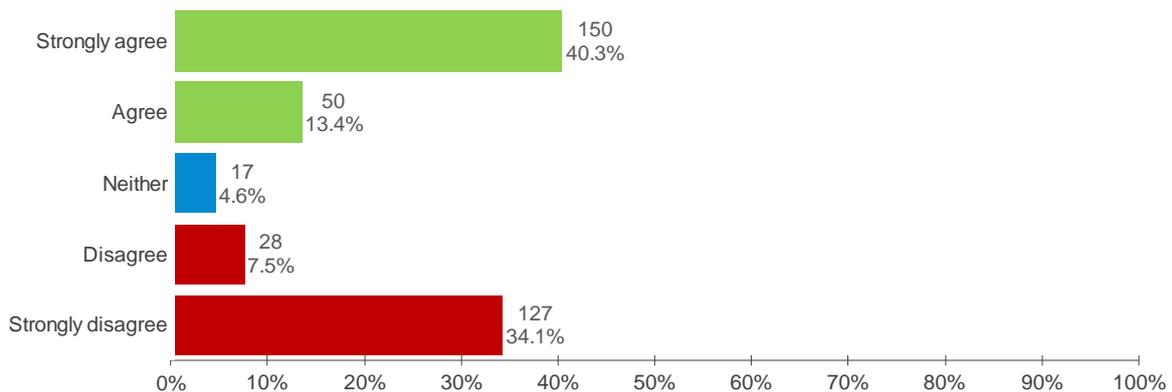
The Stables & Greenacres consultation webpages had a total of 10,456 page views between 22nd August and 14th November 2017, demonstrating a high level of interest and reach of the campaign. The top method used to find information was via Facebook with 3,283 visits. Others included; 1,989 from council email bulletins, and 1,423 visits from Google searches.

4. Feedback on the proposals

In total 382 residents participated in the consultation by completing the survey. 80% (301) said they were local residents, including 25% (96) who live within a mile of the two sites. An additional 5% (17) responded as residents of either Greenacres or The Stables. These groups were key stakeholders and it was important to engage with all of them throughout the consultation.

a. Proposal to buy Greenacres & The Stables

Q1 To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal as our preferred option?



54% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal to buy the two sites and build a council-managed site near to the current location. 42% disagreed with the proposal. It is worth noting the majority of responses were either 'strongly agree' or 'strongly disagree' demonstrating the polarised views of this proposal.

Comments on the proposal:

278 respondents provided additional comments regarding this first question. An analysis of the comments has raised several points of concern, with the most frequent themes being:

- Concerns about the high cost to the tax payer (90 respondents)
- Concerns about current criminal/ anti-social behaviour from site residents (70 respondents)
- Support for proposal (53 respondents)
- Move site away from Billington (33 respondents)
- Proposal will not address illegal behaviour (32 respondents)
- Regulate existing site (23 respondents)
- More site inspections needed in future (18 respondents)
- Concerns over whether the £9 million would be recovered (12 respondents)

“Where is the budget coming from? Residents not local to these sites may NOT be happy if local taxation has to be raised to cover a problem which may not affect them...”

“I feel that the sites should be closed down. The council spending £9 million is not going to change the behaviour of the individuals living on the sites...”

“I think that this proposal is a disgraceful waste of public money and based on the 56 site this equates to £161K per approved plot. The proposal does not address the root cause of the problems associated to these sites which is essential illegal activity, anti social behaviour and a disregard for any previous authority. With this in mind I cannot see how this would change, just with a change of ownership.”

“On the presumption that Council staff are able to control the site so that it runs on a legal, controlled basis, this seems the only logical solution for the well being of all parties. It is also presumed that the Council currently run sites set a good example of what can be achieved with careful management”

“Regulation, enforcement and monitoring will most defiantly be required. Also any breach will need to be dealt with not just ignored as appears to be the case at the moment.”

Summary

Over half of respondents (54%) agreed with the new site option put forward. Local residents (within 1 mile) were even more supportive (57%) whilst residents living further away towards the north of Central Bedfordshire were less supportive (48%).

Comments show widespread concern about the cost of this option, with a sense of injustice that this amount of money could potentially be allocated instead of being used more widely to improve services. There were further concerns about the message this sends out, spending a substantial amount of money on sites that have been associated with a high volume of crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) in the past.

Crime and anti-social behaviour was another frequently occurring theme with many respondents concerned about the current levels of crime and anti-social behaviour emanating from the two sites, with further concerns that this proposal to move the sites will not solve the problem. It must be highlighted that whilst this topic was a frequent theme, there was disagreement among respondents about the most suitable solution with only 33% of respondents who highlighted ASB issues agreeing with the new site option and 61% disagreeing with it. This shows that whilst there is widespread concern about criminality and anti-social behaviour, there is no clear consensus about how to tackle the problem within the area.

Additionally, comments about crime and anti-social behaviour were more frequent from residents living nearer to the sites, with 60% coming from residents of Billington, Leighton Linlade or Stanbridge, indicating the specific problems with these sites which are leading to a breakdown in community cohesion.

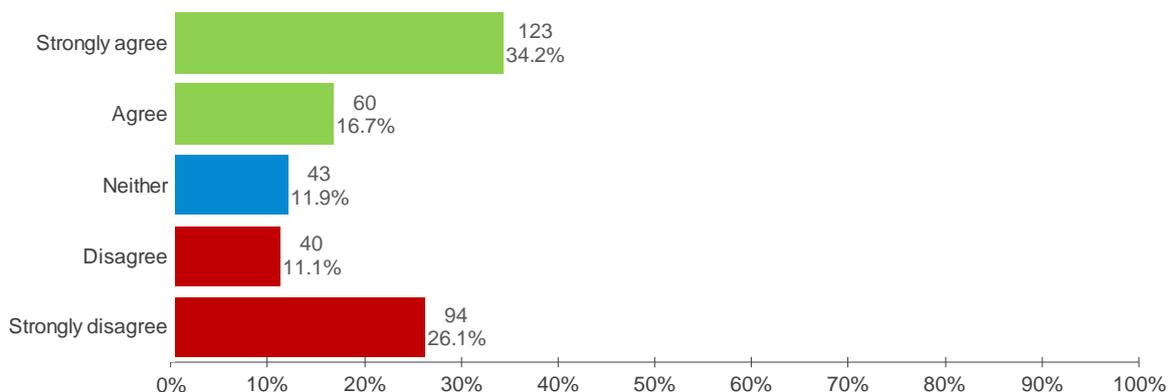
Other frequent themes included; support for the proposal with an acknowledgement that something was finally being done and a request to regulate the current sites more effectively rather than build a new one with concerns about how and whether the £9 million would be recouped for the taxpayer.

17 responses were received from residents of either Greenacres or The Stables with 10 (59%) disagreeing with the new site option and only 5 (30%) in agreement. Comments indicated a desire from site residents to keep and own their own homes – citing a settled and close community with children at school as reasons for this. There was an acknowledgement and willingness from several residents to work with the council to resolve current issues and two also expressing a desire to see the site under council control. Other comments expressed concern regarding a lack of detail in the proposals and concern for potentially displaced families should they be required to leave the site.

“Want to keep own home. Friends and family around – feel settled. Kids at school. Close community.” (Greenacres or Stables resident)

b. Discontinuance and Injunction

Q3 To what extent do you agree or disagree that this is not a suitable solution?



51% of respondents agreed with the Central Bedfordshire Council view that the ‘Discontinuance and Injunction’ option would not be a suitable solution. 37% disagreed with the council’s view and 12% responded ‘Neither’.

Comments on the proposal:

211 respondents provided additional comments regarding this proposal, with the most frequent themes being:

- Better enforcement is needed (45 respondents)
- Planning permissions and conditions should apply to all (30 respondents)
- Proposal will not address all problems at the site (24 respondents)
- This proposal is a better option (17 respondents)
- Site owners should provide own facilities/amenities (16 respondents)

- Proposal is not a good idea (15 respondents)
- All people not entitled to be there should be removed (15 respondents)

“It will not tackle the problem as there has been no enforcement up to now and I can't see how the council would be able to oversee this when it has proven very difficult in the past. How would you know who is legally entitled to be on the sites when the occupants are not particularly forthcoming with their information.”

“Although apparently potentially more cost effective, the indicated problems and time requirements to implement this policy would seem to make this an unrealistic and unsatisfactory solution for all parties.”

“I think anything without permission should be removed and they should be fined. If they don't have the basics for living then it is because they do not have permission to live there! Why should the general public fund adequate health and safety issues with someone's living conditions on their own private land?”

“I think that this is a better option but does need to go further to ensure that if people are living on the land and using it for residential use, then an enforced planning requirement, must be provided by each of the landowners for each plot. Restrictions should ensure that plots cannot be occupied until this work is completed.”

Summary

The majority of respondents agreed with the Central Bedfordshire view that the ‘Discontinuance and Injunction’ proposal is not a suitable solution. Local residents (within 1 mile) were most strongly in agreement (59%), with the council view, whilst residents living further away towards the north of Central Bedfordshire were less likely to agree that ‘Discontinuance and Injunction’ was not a suitable solution (26%). This would indicate that residents living further away from the site are more inclined to believe that this option should be actively considered.

45 additional comments have highlighted a desire from respondents to see greater enforcement of planning permissions and conditions. Of these, 53% of comments disagreed with the council view that Discontinuance and Injunction was not a suitable solution. This suggests that respondents would like to see a solution whereby the current sites are overseen and monitored more thoroughly.

This is further evidenced by the second largest theme which has seen residents requesting a fairer approach that would see everyone adhering to the same planning rules and regulations. There was a feeling from the ‘settled’ community that felt it was unfair that site residents had been ‘allowed’ to get away with a lack of planning permissions for so long. Something they felt the wider community would not be able to do.

Once again there was another suggestion that this proposal would not resolve all the identified problems, particularly in relation to crime and anti-social behaviour which

was also seen in comments on the preferred option. Other prominent themes included suggestions that site owners are responsible for amenities and facilities on site and should therefore be responsible for the decision and cost of installing these, not the tax payer. There was also a desire to see all residents not permitted to be on site removed, further supporting the biggest request for more enforcement on site.

Residents of Greenacres and The Stables were undecided about the 'Discontinuance & Injunction' option with only 25% in support of the council's position that this was not a suitable solution and 31% supporting the 'Discontinuance and Injunction' option. The remaining 44% responded as 'Neither' suggesting no favour either way. This is explained in the comments with most declaring a willingness to work with the council to reach a solution and a desire to address current issues and comply with conditions. There were also comments suggesting this option was preferable because it would save the council money.

"Willing to work with the council. Want to sort it out." (Greenacre or Stables resident)

c. Other options

'Do you have any other comments or suggestions that could help to resolve the issues?'

220 respondents provided additional comments for this question, with the most frequent themes being:

- Ensure enforcement is proactive (45 respondents)
- Concerns about current criminal and anti-social behaviour (33 respondents)
- Move site away from the area (27 respondents)
- Close the site (23 respondents)
- Ensure proper planning controls are implemented (22 respondents)
- Support for preferred option (18 respondents)
- Concerns about £9 million expenditure (18 respondents)

"Enforce the existing planning conditions with the full force of the law with the support of the police and other organisations. Everyone in this country needs to be judged in the same way and if we do not remove illegal structures and prosecute those responsible, it will happen again and again."

"Removal of families who are not meant to be on site. Prosecution of people renting out accommodation to those not meant to be on site. Prosecution for H&S breaches. Presumably the site has to be registered with & licenced by, the local authority. This licence needs reviewing and stipulations placed before allowing it to continue... I have no problem with permanent sites but they need to be robustly observed to ensure they do not become unmanageable "no go " areas like these have become. These sites should never have been allowed to become what they have, privately owned or not!"

“A compulsory purchase order, or agreed sale of plots, seems to be the only solution to resolve the many problems identified.”

“Can a solution be found to merge these two options? Perhaps find a solutions to the safeguarding, health and safety issues at the current site and install the utilities, surely resolving these issues won't cost nearly as much as moving the site?”

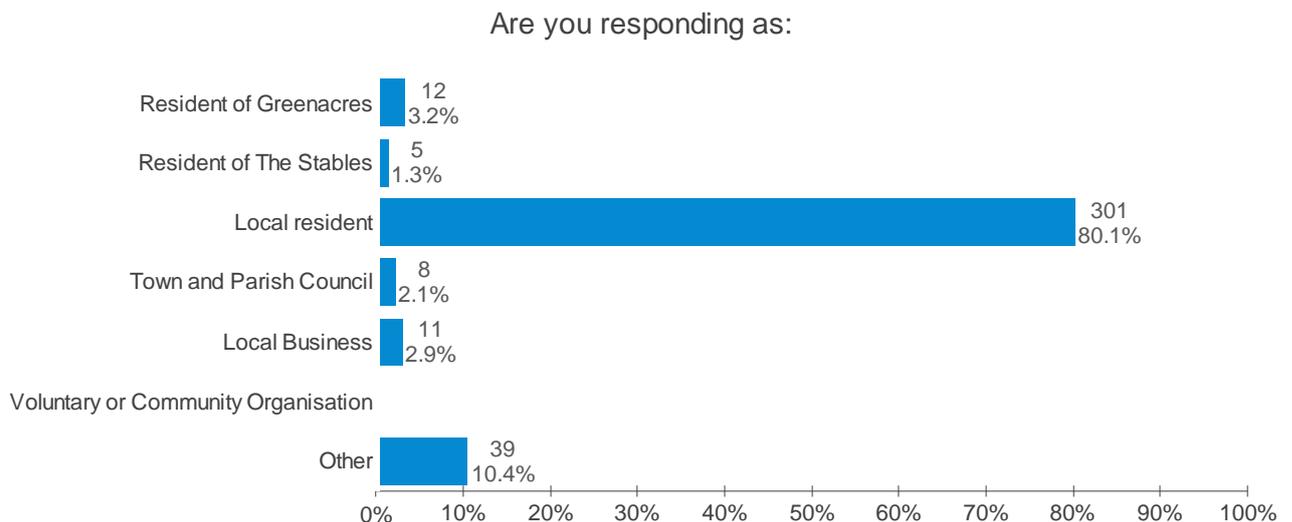
“Willing to work with the Council” (Greenacre or Stables resident)

Summary

When asked for further comments or suggestions, many respondents reinforced earlier points. Proactive enforcement, concerns about current criminal and anti-social behaviour, concerns about the £9 million expenditure all reappeared from previous questions. A desire to see more proactive enforcement appears to be linked to concerns about the £9 million expenditure with these respondents keen to see the issues resolved through stricter enforcement than the larger expenditure. Concerns remain about the criminal and anti-social behaviour in the area and appears to be the biggest concern overall for local residents.

Greenacres & The Stables residents reinforced earlier commitments to working with the council. There was also a request from two respondents to see the removal of residents who are not permitted to be living there.

d. Profile of respondents



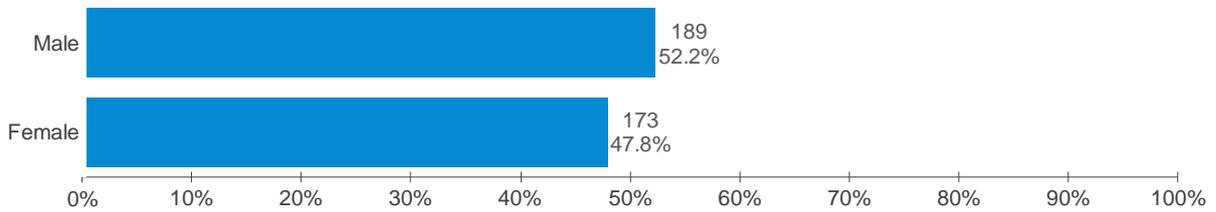
If Town or Parish Council, please specify:

- _____ Dunstable
- _____ Parish Council (not stated which one)
- _____ Clifton parish council
- _____ Slapton
- _____ Lu7
- _____ Kensworth Parish Council

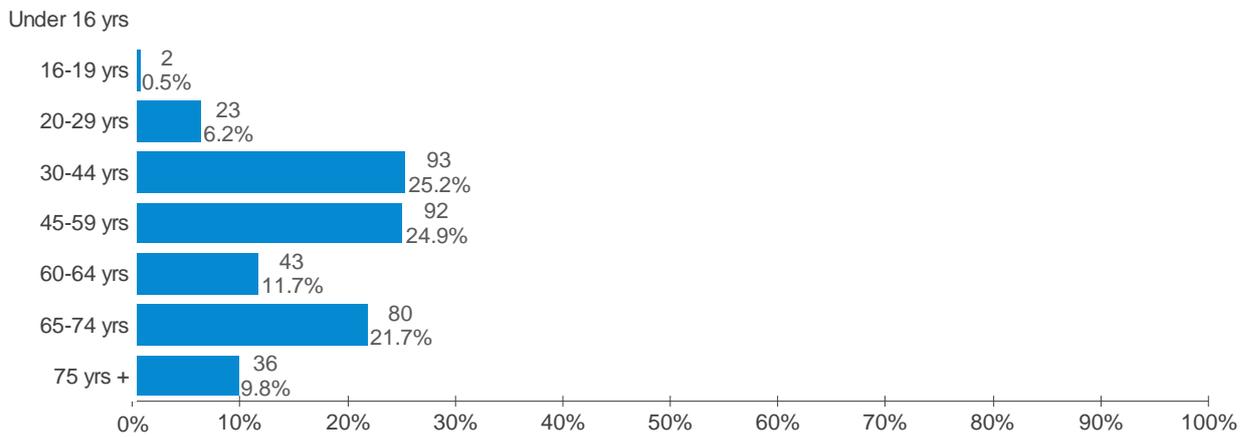
Bedfordshire or from particular surrounding areas near to the sites.

‘Other’ respondents identified themselves as residents of Central

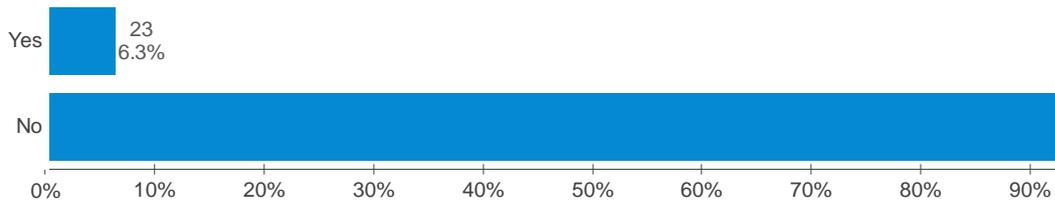
Are you:



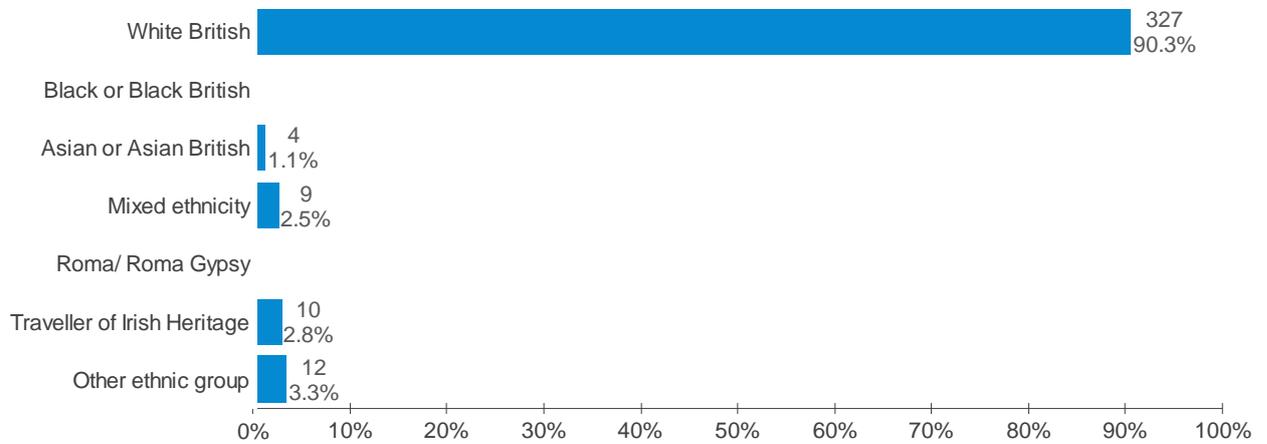
What is your age?



Do you consider yourself to be disabled?



To which of these groups do you consider you belong?



Postcode analysis

347 respondents provided their postcode. Of which, 315 were valid for analysis.

Ward	No. of responses
Aylesbury Vale	
Edlesborough	2
Pitstone & Cheddington	1
Wingrave	17
Aylesbury Vale Total	20
Central Bedfordshire	
Amphill	2
Arlesey	2
Aspley and Woburn	1
Biggleswade South	1
Caddington	15
Dunstable-Icknield	3
Dunstable-Manshead	1

Ward	No. of responses
Dunstable-Northfields	8
Dunstable-Watling	1
Eaton Bray	93
Flitwick	6
Heath and Reach	50
Houghton Conquest and Haynes	1
Houghton Hall	3
Leighton Buzzard North	24
Leighton Buzzard South	52
Linslade	21
Northhill	1
Potton	2
Shefford	1

Ward	No. of responses
Silsoe and Shillington	1
Stotfold and Langford	1
Toddington	1
Westoning, Flitton and Greenfield	1
Central Bedfordshire Total	292
Hillingdon	
South Ruislip	1
Hillingdon Total	1

Ward	No. of responses
Luton	
Challney	1
Leagrave	1
Luton Total	2
Grand Total	315

The analysis indicates that the consultation was accessed well by residents within the local area to Billington. Wards such as Eaton Bray, Health & Reach, Leighton Buzzard North/South and Linslade were all well represented in the consultation. See appendix A for a visual map of responses.

5. Other feedback

Additional representations were made in the form of letters from local residents, Billington Parish Council and the neighbouring Slapton Parish Council. To summarise, the letters included several suggestions of moving the site of Greenacres & The Stables to other areas within Central Bedfordshire. Many of these suggestions were predicated on concerns about long-standing anti-social and criminal behaviour attributed to the sites and the effect this has had on the local population. Claims of significantly reduced property prices and a disproportionate amount of Gypsy and Traveller sites within the area were also key drivers behind the request to relocate the site away from Billington.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, the option for a new site was supported by just over half of those that responded to the consultation. Residents local to Billington were more supportive of the proposal, and were keen to see action taken to address the current issues with the sites. Crime and anti-social behaviour coming from the sites was the biggest concern for local residents and this was evidenced throughout the findings. With this in mind there were concerns that the preferred option would not solve this problem with many suggesting that building a new site would just be moving the problem. Additionally, there was also a lot of concern about the cost of this proposal with many voicing their displeasure at the sum of £9 million.

Half of respondents also supported Central Bedfordshire Council's view that Discontinuance & Injunction would not be a suitable solution. Many who disagreed with the Central Bedfordshire view wanted to see greater enforcement of planning permissions and conditions on the two sites to ensure that the rules are applicable,

and enforcement is fair to everyone. There was a view that Central Bedfordshire should be doing more to ensure the rules are enforced on the two sites rather than spend money on a new one. Residents local to Billington were more supportive of the Central Bedfordshire view than those further afield.

It should be acknowledged that the number of responses from residents from Greenacres and The Stables was low, meaning that it is hard to gauge whether the views received are representative of the whole community. Provisions were put in place by Central Bedfordshire Council to allow site residents to engage with the consultation in various ways including face-to-face, telephone and the anonymous survey which was sent to residents and then hand delivered on another occasion. From the responses that were received, the overriding comment was one of willingness to work with the council to resolve the issues that had been highlighted. Site residents did not want to leave their homes and so were not in favour of the new site option. Nor, were they in favour of the Discontinuance & Injunction option either. An agreement and acknowledgement that issues needed to be resolved has prompted further discussions with the community.

The findings of the consultation have reinforced the need for change with agreement across the board that issues at Greenacres & The Stables need addressing. The preferred option received the most support from the majority of residents bar those living on the two sites. However, neither option proposed was overwhelmingly supported, and all respondents highlighted valid reasons for and against each proposal. These views will need to be taken into consideration before a decision is made regarding the future of both sites.

Appendix A

Billington consultatio

