

Out in the open

The issue of Gypsy and Traveller accommodation is of perennial interest, impacting on the lives of members of the settled population, as well as those of Gypsies and Travellers. Ensuring sufficient provision of suitable authorised caravan pitches for Gypsies and Travellers can reap great rewards for local authorities and their constituents, both settled and travelling.

Experience shows us that creating a supply of well designed, well managed, lawful sites can create a broad range of benefits. As well as the benefits for Gypsies and Travellers of having lawful and secure places to stay and better access to services like health and education, there are also advantages for members of the settled community due to the reduced numbers of unauthorised encampments, and to local authorities who can make large savings in their budgets for taking enforcement actions against unauthorised sites.

The rights of Gypsies and Travellers to pursue their way of life are enshrined in national and international legislation. Experience has shown, however, that these rights are rarely upheld or supported in practice. Gypsies and Travellers have the poorest life chances of any ethnic groups in the UK, and still face widespread discrimination and overt racism.

The health and educational outcomes of Gypsies and Travellers make for particularly stark reading. The GCSE results of Gypsies and Travellers, for example, are significantly lower on average than those of any other racial groups in the UK. In relation to Gypsy and Traveller health, one detailed study reported 18% of Gypsy and traveller mothers had experienced the death of a child, compared to less than 1% of the settled community.

Research has consistently linked issues like these to the lack of good quality sites for Gypsies and Travellers. Central government policy has in the last few years taken a direction that reflects this, culminating in a restored duty on local authorities to identify land for sites (although not necessarily to provide those sites themselves). The process established by government, however, is likely to take some considerable time, and, in the meantime, 21% of Gypsies and Travellers living in caravans are still homeless, in law and in reality, with no lawful place to park their caravans, and left to deal with the associated problems that brings.

The key areas of action needed to address some of these issues include:

- Providing authorised sites to meet urgent short-term accommodation needs, until the Government's new policy framework can deliver permanent sites;
- Addressing the lack of will across all levels of the political spectrum to tackle the existing widespread discrimination against Gypsies and Travellers;
- Integrating Gypsy and Traveller rights and needs into existing policies and mainstream services;
- Obtaining accurate and wide ranging information to inform policy, counteract misinformation in the media and enable the sharing of good practice;
- Recognising the opportunities provided by working in partnership with Gypsy and Traveller communities, as well as social housing providers and landowners to improve the availability and choice of accommodation.

Who are Gypsies and Travellers?

Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers are long established and legally recognised racial groups in Britain, with history and traditions reaching back many centuries. Both groups have their own languages and strong cultures, in which family and community ties are important, with great emphasis placed on caring for children, the elderly and infirm.

One of the key cultural characteristics is the nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life, although not all Gypsies and Travellers actually travel and it is recognised that physical travelling is not a defining characteristic. Travelling patterns vary over time according to stage of the family life cycle, health and personal circumstances.

There is a wide range of estimates of the number of Gypsies and Travellers in Britain, some as low as 90,000-120,000, others as high as 300,000. The exact figure is not known and is difficult to estimate, with current approximations drawn from a range of sources. It is also not known what percentage of Gypsies and Travellers live in 'bricks and mortar' accommodation and what percentage live in caravans. While Gypsies and Travellers can be found throughout the UK, there are specific areas of concentration of travelling communities in the East of England, the South East and the South West.

Challenging the widespread discrimination faced by Gypsy and Traveller communities in the UK, Diane Diacon, Director, Building and Social Housing Foundation (BSHF), calls for action and understanding...

‘The rights of Gypsies and Travellers to pursue their way of life are enshrined in national and international legislation. Experience has shown, however, that these rights are rarely upheld or supported in practice.’



**Diane Diacon
Director**

**Building and Social
Housing Foundation
Memorial Square
Coalville
Leicestershire LE67 3TU**

**Tel: 01530 510444
Fax: 01530 510332**

**bshf@bshf.org
www.bshf.org**

© Derek Speirs and Povee Point



Problems faced by Gypsies and Travellers:

- Lack of adequate and appropriate sites to park their caravans when travelling;
- Poor access to education and health services, with resulting higher levels of ill health and poor education compared to the settled population;
- Obtaining planning permission on land they have purchased to provide sites;
- Open hostility from some members of settled communities, with discrimination and racist attitudes still widespread and rarely challenged;
- Frequent taunting and bullying of children at school;
- Widespread misunderstanding and misinformation about their way of life.

Providing accommodation

The provision of adequate and appropriate sites for Gypsies and Travellers living in caravans lies at the heart of resolving inequalities of access to health, education and employment. It helps to avoid tensions with local communities and is key to tackling racism and discrimination.

Local authorities have a key part to play in the provision of accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers, whether as a provider themselves or as the authorities responsible for granting planning permission on other providers' sites.

As noted above, the Government has now set a policy direction that should ensure increased provision of sites in the longer term. As well as engaging positively with this framework, local authorities should take steps to ensure interim provision is as high as possible over the intervening period.

Promoting understanding

The factors that make it so difficult to deliver appropriate accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers are not primarily housing or planning issues. They are

much wider and deep-seated, relating to the prejudice and negative attitudes towards the travelling communities.

Well trained and well equipped local authorities can promote understanding of Gypsies and Travellers in a wide variety of ways, through specific activities, through the local media, and by sending a message through the way they work.

It is important that there should be a widespread challenge to the media when its

coverage is inflammatory, inaccurate or prejudicial, and that this should come from local authorities and Gypsies and Travellers, as well as bodies such as the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. One way in which negative reporting can be countered is by promoting positive stories, particularly in the local press, where greater coverage can be given, as well as in the national farming press to highlight examples of mutually beneficial coexistence and co-operation.

Recognising rights

Gypsies and Travellers are entitled to the same rights as other British citizens, including the right to access services such as health, housing, education, welfare and criminal justice. Gypsies and Travellers have significantly lower than average educational attainment and health indicators than the settled community and there is little recognition of their particular needs in accessing these services.

Many of the barriers that Gypsies and Travellers face are due to the racism and discrimination that is still prevalent. The ability to counteract this is limited by a lack of information on a range of issues. For example, gathering data relating to Gypsy and Traveller ethnic status by the criminal justice system would enable greater clarity as to the extent to which Gypsies and Travellers are involved in criminal activity or experience hate crime. Only with firm evidence can the unsupported assertions of the national and local media be challenged.

Further information

This article is drawn from the report produced as the result of a consultation organised by the Building and Social Housing Foundation at St George's House in Windsor Castle. The report, entitled 'Out in the Open: Providing accommodation, promoting understanding and recognising rights of Gypsies and Travellers', includes detailed recommendations for action for local government and others to help meet the needs that have been identified. Electronic copies can be downloaded and printed copies ordered from the Publications section of BSHF's website at www.bshf.org. An executive summary specifically highlighting the recommendations for those in local government is also available from the same website.