



KEY FACTS

- In 2006, 21 per cent of Gypsies and Travellers living in caravans were homeless, having no lawful place to park their caravan.
- Less than one square mile of land in the whole of England would be sufficient to provide pitches for all the Gypsy and Traveller families who are currently homeless.
- 18 per cent of Gypsy and Traveller mothers have experienced the death of a child, compared to one per cent of the settled community.
- Estimates of the number of Gypsies and Travellers in Britain range from 90,000 to 300,000, although data are far from certain.
- 12 per cent of Gypsy and Traveller sites are located close to rubbish tips, 26 per cent are close to major roads, four per cent are near sewage farms and 13 per cent are near runways.

“There is evidence that Gypsies and Travellers experience the worst health and education status of any disadvantaged group in England. Research has consistently confirmed the link between the lack of good quality sites for Gypsies and Travellers and poor health and education.”

Local authorities and Gypsies and Travellers: a guide to responsibilities and powers, Communities and Local Government, May 2007

Out in the Open

Providing accommodation, promoting understanding and recognising rights of Gypsies and Travellers

CONSULTATION AT ST GEORGE'S HOUSE, WINDSOR CASTLE

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 face widespread discrimination.

In June 2007 the Building and Social Housing Foundation (BSHF) organised a Consultation at St George's House, Windsor Castle, to identify practical ways in which stakeholders can work together with Gypsies and Travellers and local communities to provide appropriate accommodation and support for their way of life, as well as promoting respect and understanding between Gypsies and Travellers and other members of the public. Persons of experience and expertise were brought together for three days in order to share and develop ideas as to how to meet this challenge.

A report containing a summary of the discussion and recommendations of the Consultation has been published. The key information and recommendations for action for local government are set out below for quick reference.

KEY AREAS FOR ACTION

- 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 political 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.

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.

INCREASING THE SUPPLY OF ACCOMMODATION

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. A range of recommendations were put forward to increase the overall number of sites. These include:

- Local authorities should use Section 106 agreements to provide land or financial resources for Gypsy and Traveller sites in the same way as they are used to provide additional social housing. The Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA), Local Government Association (LGA) and Communities and Local Government (CLG) should support this by disseminating good practice case studies as they become available.
- Local authorities should ensure that the planning process addresses the wider sustainability of sites in the same way it would for bricks and mortar accommodation. The process should address factors such as travel to work, access to services and public transport, amongst others, and not cause sites to be developed in areas which would not be acceptable for bricks and mortar accommodation due to environmental and health risks.
- Local authorities should involve Gypsies and Travellers early on in consultations of potential locations for sites.
- Local authorities should assist Gypsies and Travellers in the planning process by providing guidance from the early stage of site selection, through to providing assistance with submitting planning applications.

MEETING INTERIM ACCOMMODATION NEEDS

The Consultation supported the current direction of government policy, which should lead to provision of an adequate number of sites in the longer term. However, the process could take five or more years before additional sites become available.

As well as engaging positively with the current framework to ensure adequate provision of sites in the longer term, local authorities should take steps to ensure interim provision is as high as possible over the intervening period. It is therefore recommended that:



- Local authorities should consider alternative means of obtaining land for temporary use as a site, such as renting farmland from farmers. Local authorities could consider operating these in the summer months only, to ease the greater shortage at this time of the year, if they feel it would be easier to obtain agreement for this.

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.

SENDING A MESSAGE

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 cooperation. It is recommended that:

- Local authorities should ensure that responsibility for Gypsy and Traveller issues, at district or borough levels, falls within appropriate departments, such as Housing and/or Equality and Diversity Departments and not in Environmental/Public Health.
- Local authorities should respond to inaccurate reporting in the local media by seeking to put the record straight, as well as actively promoting positive stories.
- All public bodies should include Gypsy and Traveller issues within all their programmes of diversity

training and cultural awareness-raising for all front line service providers, including social services staff.

- IDEa should initiate training, education and awareness-raising for councillors, including information on engagement with settled communities on the issues, especially site location. This should include creating a 'Councillors' Toolkit' to help inform elected members about Gypsy and Traveller issues.
- IDEa should disseminate good local authority practice in relation to Gypsies and Travellers and establish a website with information and examples of good practice.
- Local authorities and schools should include Gypsies and Travellers within cultural events where diversity is celebrated.

PARTNERSHIP WORKING WITH GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS

Gypsies and Travellers are rarely involved in local decision-making. This is partly because they have little confidence in the process, but also because arrangements are rarely designed to include them and there is little direct recognition of their rights to be consulted. Gypsy and Traveller needs are assumed to be associated principally with sites, rather than the basic services provided for other members of the public. To help address these issues it is recommended that:

- Local authorities should create and facilitate Gypsy and Traveller Forums with high levels of Gypsy and Traveller participation to provide an opportunity to identify key needs and aspirations.
- Local authorities should seek to engage with Gypsies and Travellers in community consultation processes on all issues affecting their area, not just those that specifically relate to Gypsies and Travellers.
- Local public bodies should establish an inter-agency forum at a regional or sub-regional level, bringing together officers who work with Gypsies and Travellers from different organisations and departments to act as a support network, share best practice and coordinate service provision.
- Local authorities should ensure there is a Gypsy and Traveller Advisory Officer in every authority who is well trained and capable of building and maintaining positive relationships with the community, not just an enforcer.
- Mediation services, who are used to dealing with conflict between different parties, should, with appropriate training, offer their services when conflict arises between or within communities to help resolve the conflict.

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 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. It is recommended that:

- Local authorities, health authorities and other relevant public bodies should provide information on their services in alternative formats where difficulties may be encountered due to poor literacy.
- Local authorities should ensure that their Equality Impact Assessment processes are robust and that Gypsies and Travellers are actively considered within them.
- All public authorities should include Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers as categories within all exercises where racial/ethnic data is gathered or monitored, including ethnic monitoring of crime and anti-social behaviour.
- Local authorities should ensure that Sure Start programmes are accessible to those living on sites, placing a scheme on the site where appropriate.
- Local Gypsy and Traveller groups with local authority Gypsy and Traveller Advisory Officers should develop and provide training/awareness-raising aimed at Gypsies and Travellers on the roles of police and social services departments and support Gypsies and Travellers to interact effectively with authority figures.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Full details of all recommendations distilled from the three day consultation are contained within a comprehensive report entitled *Out in the Open: Providing accommodation, promoting understanding and recognising rights of Gypsies and Travellers*.

Please contact BSHF if you would like to receive a free copy of the report, which is also available for downloading from our website at www.bshf.org (Publications section).

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