

# Providing Gypsy and Traveller sites: contentious spaces

Findings  
Informing change

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Local authorities face new duties to assess the accommodation needs of Gypsies and Travellers, and to incorporate sites in local development plan documents where a need is demonstrated. This study examined the barriers to new site provision and analysed some of the methods for conflict resolution, in the context of these legal requirements.

## Key points

- Four issues were critical for site development to be addressed positively at a local level: a positive context for exploring the debate, including from the local media; effective management of existing authorised and unauthorised sites; effective consideration of new sites with clear, well-managed communication of proposals; and strong political leadership to set the context for action.
- The context for debating the provision of new Gypsy and Traveller sites has an impact on the success of the outcome. In several of the case study areas, adverse media coverage and public opposition reinforced each other to create a hostile context for plans, and in one area local councillors voted against proposals as a result. Elsewhere, where local authorities liaised closely with the local media, and held training events for officers and councillors, a positive context was set for debating new Gypsy and Traveller site provision.
- Site management was perceived as a key issue by local authority officers, police, councillors, Gypsies and Travellers, and the 'settled community'. Well-managed sites were not only good places to live for Gypsies and Travellers, but also improved the perception of the travelling community in the eyes of the 'settled community', thereby allaying fears that might feed into public objections on future site proposals.
- The management of unauthorised encampments and developments was also an important factor affecting the public perception of Gypsies and Travellers. Some local authorities noted that providing official sites enabled savings to be made on the cost of clearing up unauthorised encampments, thus providing a 'business case' for new provision.
- Leadership and political will is vital in the debate on new provision of Gypsy and Traveller sites. Where strength was shown by the leader of the council, or the chief executive, the tone was set for a positive discussion of the issues.
- In addition to the legal case and moral case for site provision, political leaders also understood there was a business case to be made. All three approaches helped to inform the debates in different areas.

## The research

By Joanna Richardson of De Montfort University

## Background

The issue of Gypsy and Traveller site provision is often contentious and open to public opposition. Nevertheless, it is recognised that Gypsy/Traveller housing needs have sometimes been poorly addressed and new legislation has placed duties on local authorities, which should result in the provision of more Gypsy and Traveller sites. The Housing Act (2004), in conjunction with Circular ODPM 1/06, requires councils to assess the needs of Gypsies and Travellers and, via the Regional Planning Body, to include how this need will be met in local development plans.

This study sought to learn from a range of different experiences and approaches to the issue. The two key aims of the research were to find out:

- how local authorities can plan for appropriate accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers; and
- how the often-arising community conflict can be resolved.

## Case study areas

Six case study local authority areas were chosen in different regions in England, covering a range of different local authority types (including single tier and two tier council areas) and rural/urban contexts and including councils at varying stages in the site development process. The six case studies (named Local Authority 1-6 here) reflected different political control along with differing Gypsy and Traveller populations and histories of site provision. Some areas had a number of council-managed sites with more in the pipeline, and others had no sites and no plans for sites. Only one local authority had a transit site, although another case study had already recognised a need for one in their area. The areas were also at different stages in addressing the new legal requirements for needs assessment and allocation of site provision in local development plan documents.

## Findings from the study

There was a stark contrast in the approach and levels of political commitment to Gypsies and Travellers between some of the case studies. One had no sites and there seemed to be little engagement with the cultural issues and needs of Gypsies and Travellers. Two areas had large Gypsy and Traveller populations; one of these had a strong leader of the council and this had positively impacted on the ground; and the other had effective officers who have been proactive in disseminating its positive approach to managing sites. Of the other four areas, there was public support from politicians in two of the authorities, and the remaining two were not so vocal in supporting Gypsy and Traveller issues.

All of the case study local authority areas had issues particular to their locality but all, bar one, of the case studies had begun to engage with the need to deal with the new legislative requirements around site provision.

Overall, four key 'foundation stones' were critical in taking forward this agenda in a positive way and addressing potential opposition from the wider community. These were:

- setting a positive context for debate;
- effective management of existing authorised and unauthorised sites;
- effective consideration of new sites with clear, well-managed communication of proposals;
- strong political leadership to set the context for action.

### Setting a positive context for debate: perception of Gypsies and Travellers

In all of the case study areas, stakeholders including local authority staff, police, councillors, health workers, education workers, Gypsies and Travellers were aware of the impact of negative media and public perceptions about Gypsies and Travellers on the outcome of proposals for new sites. Local Authority 4 witnessed this when a large hostile public meeting resulted in councillors voting against the proposals. This public perception was both informed by and reflected in the local media.

More proactive approaches were seen in other areas. In particular, Local Authority 5 had a process of liaising with the local media and of training local councillors and staff, in order to tackle prejudices and disseminate facts about Gypsies and Travellers, leading to a more positive tone in local debates.

The research found that to be successful in setting a positive context it was necessary for councils to

address the public and local media perceptions of Gypsies and Travellers and set a positive tone to inform discussion and decision making on future site provision.

## **Effective management of authorised and unauthorised sites**

The six case study areas had a range of approaches to site management and differing existing site provision. A key issue was how local authorities dealt with unauthorised sites while ensuring authorised sites were well serviced and managed. This involved utilising their differing roles of liaising with and providing services to Gypsy and Traveller communities and taking enforcement action on unauthorised encampments and developments.

In Local Authority 5 a strong relationship had been established between the council's management team and local Gypsies and Travellers and the council suggests that taking an even-handed 'firm but fair' approach had enabled them to successfully combine liaison and 'enforcement'. This approach included supportive provision, for example Supporting People agreements being made with Gypsy/Traveller families and their children, quick repairs on site and proactive site management, but also, where necessary, firm action on disputes and on a particular unauthorised encampment.

A firm approach was also taken by Local Authority 6 in relation to unauthorised encampments. Detailed records were taken of where people pitched illegally, including records of registration numbers and caravan details. Whilst on the one hand this can be seen as a method of monitoring and control, photographing recently vacated encampments had also served to disprove cases where public complaints have been made about the Gypsies and Travellers who had stopped there. Alongside this, Local Authority 6 offered outreach services to authorised, and some unauthorised, sites.

Where existing sites are well managed, and seen to be well managed, this can lead to a more positive local understanding of Gypsies and Travellers and helps the community to trust the council when it proposes new sites. Where unauthorised sites are managed appropriately this also helps to build trust with all members of the local community.

## **Effective consideration of new sites**

There are examples of good practice in the progression of new sites for Gypsies and Travellers through the local planning process, both in the case study authorities and in other local authorities.

The case studies in this research reflected a range of approaches, with mixed success. Local consultation strategies, communications plans and site selection criteria all varied in their complexity and effectiveness. At one extreme, Local Authority 4 had failed to manage the consultation process on proposals for two sites effectively. Letters were sent to a very large group of local people, and the individuals presumed to have an interest in the plans grew to an unmanageable number. Questions and answers were dealt with at a meeting with a huge public delegation, and a hostile atmosphere fed into opposition and hostile community responses, which deterred council members from progressing the proposals for the new sites.

By contrast, in a local authority outside the six case study areas, questions and answers were dealt with comprehensively ahead of a public meeting in written letters, often addressing individual concerns; this addressed objections that might have been raised at the face-to-face consultation events.

Site selection criteria also vary between authorities. One of the case studies suggested the key criterion was whether Gypsies and Travellers said they would like to live in the suggested location. Other authorities have used a range of weighted criteria that attempt to examine physical attributes of the land and accessibility to services, coupled with feasibility studies on the suitability of the land for development.

Local Authority 6 was the only case study to have already identified sites for Gypsy and Traveller communities in its existing Local Plan, following a detailed and comprehensive consultation exercise. This process included discussions with all local stakeholders. The consultation and deliberation on the final recommendations took 1,200 hours in all. It had also had plans approved for the redevelopment of one of its existing sites; the plans for this site were devised in consultation with Gypsies and Travellers, and have been cited as an example of good site design by the Government.

Effective consideration of new sites, with clear and simple criteria for new site selection, is important. Effective communication policies are then needed to convey these criteria to the public and encourage buy-in and support.

## **Strong leadership and political will**

The research highlighted the importance of strong political leadership by council leaders, with support from chief executive officers; and multi-agency leadership, for instance, with support from the police, health and

education, in reducing local tension and enabling productive debate on site provision. Local Authorities 1, 5 and 6 appeared to have particularly strong political leadership, and in each of these areas there was cross-party support for providing sites. Local Authority 5 (a district council) also had a commitment from the chief executive and a good relationship with the county council, which helped to push the agenda forward.

In Local Authority 3 (another district council) one of the lead councillors was strongly supportive of Gypsy and Traveller issues, and is recognised as contributing to the national debate on site provision. In this case-study area, there was not such a strong relationship between the district and the county councils; this might slow progress down where there is not close working across strategic administrative boundaries. Importantly, however, there was cross-party consensus at the district level to look for appropriate site locations.

In Local Authority 4 there was no such political consensus and there was concern that the change in political leadership of the council in 2006 had been due to Gypsy and Traveller issues and local opposition to the Gypsy/Traveller site proposals.

Strong leadership, both from senior level officers, but even more importantly from councillors – particularly leaders of councils, and portfolio holders for housing and equality issues – was a critical issue. In many ways this can set the tone for the debate on new Gypsy and Traveller site provision.

## Conclusions

The research found that in addition to the four foundation stones, there were three different ‘cases’ that were significant in informing political debates on developing site provision. These were (1) the legal

case, (2) the business case, and (3) the moral case for site provision.

The legal case centred upon councillors saying to fellow members and constituents that central Government was requiring accommodation needs to be assessed and sites to be identified through new legal duties. In some cases, this allowed for an element of procrastination on addressing the issue where this was considered locally unpopular.

The business case focused on the cost of cleaning up after unauthorised encampments and the savings that might be made by the local authority by providing authorised sites, which were anticipated to mitigate the need for further unauthorised encampments (and therefore reduce the costs associated with them).

Finally, the moral case was cited by some councillors, resulting from an awareness of inequalities in health and education for Gypsies and Travellers and the clear duty for Gypsies and Travellers to be dealt with equitably on the basis of human rights, race equality and social inclusion.

## About the project

The research was undertaken by De Montfort University, Leicester, between September 2005 and March 2007. In each of the six case studies a desk-top review of appropriate policies and strategies was followed by a questionnaire to each local authority and visits to each area for face-to face interviews with a range of stakeholders. Over 60 individuals were interviewed, including Gypsies and Travellers, local authority officers from housing, education, planning and communications departments, along with representatives from police and health agencies, as well as local councillors and Gypsy/Traveller representative groups.

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## For more information

The full report, **Providing Gypsy and Traveller sites: contentious spaces** by Joanna Richardson is published for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation by the Chartered Institute of Housing (price £15.95, ISBN 978 1 905018 58 1). You can also download this report free from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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