

Statistics vary regarding the total numbers of Gypsies and Travellers in the UK, and the percentage of these that are homeless, as there is no robust methodology for data collection. For the purposes of this article the numbers used are approximations but they serve to illustrate the general principles around making appropriate accommodation provision for Gypsies and Travellers.

It is believed that there are around 300,000 Gypsies and Travellers in the UK excluding the large numbers of recently arrived Roma communities from other parts of Europe. It must be emphasised that this figure is no more than an approximation since, until the 2011 Census, there had not been any systematic monitoring of the numbers of Gypsies and Travellers. Neither will the 2011 Census figures, when published, provide a wholly reliable figure since many Gypsies and Travellers (particularly those living in bricks and mortar housing) will not self-ascribe due to fear of harassment and discrimination. However the former Commission for Racial Equality estimated the figure at between 200,000 and 300,000 back in 2004 and the higher estimate of 300,000 is the one used today by most academics and researchers.

It is believed that around two thirds of Gypsies and Travellers live in bricks and mortar accommodation and that, of the 100,000 or so living in caravans and trailers, around one fifth to one quarter have no authorised site on which to place their home. In other words we have around 20,000 to 25,000 Gypsies and Travellers in this country who are unable to exist anywhere 'legally'. Everywhere they stop is a place they are not allowed to be and we spend an estimated £18 million per annum evicting people so that they move from one place they are not allowed to be to a different place they are not allowed to be. This approach of just forcing people to move around aimlessly makes absolutely no sense either in economic or human terms.

The answer lies in proper site provision to meet the shortfall of pitches. The national shortfall equates to around 5,000 to 6,000 pitches which set in the context of the new bricks and mortar housebuilding that is needed is a drop in the ocean. Before the recession we were told that we would need something of the order of three million new homes over the following decade. If this were the case we would only need to provide one Gypsy/Traveller pitch for every 500 – 600 new bricks and mortar homes for the shortfall to be met.

So why does this not happen? The sad truth is that wherever and wherever a Gypsy/Traveller site is proposed within a local area the opposition quickly mobilises, the placards come out, angry public meetings take place and the invariably local authority gets cold feet and refuses planning permission or drops its own proposals around site provision. The Government's current localism agenda, placing more power in the hands of local communities, is not likely to help the situation.

The Government has announced various incentives to assist the bringing forward of Gypsy/Traveller sites, including 100% grants and inclusion within the New Homes Bonus Scheme, but there is little evidence to suggest that this is having a substantial impact on site provision. One of the problems is that Government still does not collect and publish the relevant data to assess the progress or otherwise towards meeting the national shortfall. Whilst it publishes some information about grants made to local authorities and planning permissions given the key issue is the total number of pitches on the ground, either occupied or available for occupation. We can never be confident that current policies are working until we have the unequivocal evidence that this total figure is rising steadily year on year.

In the meantime, until we see reliable published evidence that the shortfall is being progressively met, we need to be in a position to challenge those local authorities that are dragging their feet over the question of site provision and possibly sitting tight in the hope that their neighbouring authority across the borough boundary will do something first, thus obviating their own need to be proactive.

Certainly local authorities will need to address their responsibilities under planning and housing legislation by carrying out Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessments and then including adequate provision to meet that need within their Local Development Plans. It is highly likely that any planning authority that fails to take its responsibility in this respect sufficiently seriously, or seeks to rely on out of date survey data when assessing need, will not be allowed to adopt its Plan but will be instructed by the planning inspectorate to go back to the drawing board. Also where Local Plans do not identify sufficient or suitable sites to meet established need, a Gypsy/Traveller applicant for planning permission will stand a much better chance of getting a local authority's decision to refuse the development overturned on appeal.

But this rather confrontational approach towards securing what surely should be a basic human right i.e. the right to a secure home cannot be the best way to resolve what should not amount to the intractable problem that society makes it to be. There is considerable evidence to demonstrate that properly authorised Gypsy and Traveller sites, and those who live there, are normally perfectly good neighbours within the local community. The usual objections that occur at the planning stage – the possibility of crime rates increasing, property values falling, increased rubbish etc. – sometimes fuelled by a scare-mongering local press, rarely materialise once the development is completed.

Local politicians have a key leadership role to play. They should not simply be driven by the (possibly ill-informed) views of their most vocal constituents but rather recognise that there is an urgent accommodation need to be met and that a 'not in my backyard' approach will not bring forth a solution. A useful first step is for those local politicians who may find themselves in the position of having to field 'difficult' questions from their constituents to undertake appropriate awareness training so that they have a thorough understanding of all the relevant issues.

Chris has been Director of Friends, Families and Travellers for the past six years and before that occupied various senior posts within the public and voluntary sectors. Originally a town planner by profession, Chris has developed an increasing interest and involvement in issues around equality and social justice. In particular he calls for a greater focus on addressing the needs of those groups that are 'chronically excluded' and who frequently remain wholly untouched by mainstream initiatives aimed at choice, participation and empowerment. As a result such groups may become even more excluded and disenfranchised, widening the equality gap still further.

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