

Transcript

Sites And Rights - Accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers

There are more than 150,000 Gypsies and Travellers living in houses or on authorised sites in England and Wales.

But a recent audit revealed that there are nearly 4000 families with no legitimate stopping places, short or long term.

Considerable police and council resources are being spent on evictions.

Frequently Asked Questions – FAQs

Where did Gypsies and Travellers used to live?

Luke Clements, Cardiff Law School

Gypsies and Travellers have been in this country for hundreds of years: five or six hundred years, fulfilling niches in a way in the employment profile so they would very often be doing seasonal farm work, other agricultural work, staying on the side of farms or wasteland, common land. And that existed happily, well, not happily, but relatively happily until the 1960s when planning controls began to bite. And common land ceased to be available to them. And it became fairly difficult.

And of course in 1968 Parliament enacted the Caravans Sites Act which placed a duty on local authorities to provide adequate accommodation for Gypsies and other Travelling people.

That Act, although it took a while, did begin to produce quite significant results so that, I think, at the end of the 1980s we had a situation where I think a third of Travelling people had nowhere lawful to live.

Why has homelessness become a problem for Gypsies and Travellers?

The Caravan Sites Act (1968) was working well, slowly, but it was beginning to bite. In 1994 the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act repealed that Act for rather extraordinary reasons. The Police Federation said it was a knee-jerk piece of legislation and the Country Landowners Association and National Farmers Union were opposed to it. They were saying: ' You know, where are these people going to go? There is no responsibility for them and they will then end up going on to private land or wherever they can because they won't evaporate.'

And the Local Government Association was vehemently opposed to the repeal of that Act, but it was repealed. At that time most of us, I think, predicted that there would be problems and of course there are problems because there are no sites and there are upwards of 3,000 families that have just nowhere to live.

Do Gypsies and Travellers have to travel?

It is very difficult to explain this idea of a nomadic feeling. I don't have it, but their feeling is that tomorrow they may travel. They may live all their life on a settled site, but they have this feeling that

they might travel tomorrow. This sense of freedom. The reality of course is that Gypsies and Travellers on local authority or private sites don't really travel. They might travel in the summer but there is, there's something intangible about this feeling nomadic. Even if you aren't travelling. It's the idea that you could or you might.

What jobs do they do?

Gypsies still pursue an independent lifestyle. I think the one way they characterise themselves is not necessarily travelling but independence. There is a reluctance to take on paid employment. They are self reliant; they are strong families so they do take on independent self employment that is often house maintenance: repairs, building work, agricultural work, landscaping work.

And of course the mobile phone has been great for them because they can give you a number, give you a card and can be doing your, painting your house for you and you don't know that they are Gypsies or Travellers. Many of them are very successful and many of them, you know, we have a significant number of councillors, a significant number of OBEs – the latest honours awards there was a very significant tranche awarded OBSs; we have teaching assistants. We have teachers, we have police officers. So we have them through the spectrum of society, the same as we have all other ethnic minorities, perhaps under represented, perhaps due to years and years of deprivation, but also due to prejudice.

What disadvantages do Gypsies and Travellers suffer?

The costs to Travellers of not settling, of not being allowed to settle are enormous. And of course it exacerbates their social exclusion. Social exclusion isn't just necessarily poverty, but they are some of the poorest people in this country. But it's the cost of education, the high illiteracy rates. The health of Gypsy Travellers, of course, is the worst in the sense that they have the highest infant mortality rates and the lowest life expectancy of any of the ethnic minorities.

So on all these indicators they do very badly indeed and of course that is because they have no settled place to live. Or very significant numbers of them have no settled place to live.

Why is there so much resistance to proposed sites?

What is surprising when you have planning applications is the vehemence of some of the letters of objection and some of the councillors as well. They say things that are utterly extraordinary, you know. And they are based on nothing other than ignorance, I think. Prejudice. I think prejudice and ignorance are similar things. They think it's perfectly acceptable to suggest that these people (Gypsies and Travellers) will be criminals, that they will be untidy; they will steal things from the neighbours.

I'm old enough to remember when people had those attitudes towards black people in the 1960s and I'm sure my parents had those attitudes towards Jewish people in the '30s and 40s. You can actually stereotype a whole race – because they are a racial group - and normally the key factor is not to know really anything about them. To not to have ever met one. Or gone in their caravan. And or known them personally. But people still see themselves as outsiders, as somehow foreign when

most of the people that are complaining about them are, you know, middle class lawyers like myself or estate agents coming in.

But these people have lived in that community for a very long time. They have lived in caravans, they have developed a cultural way of life. It wouldn't suit me, but they physically cannot go into houses. It sounds trite but it is the reality.

What is the impact of having a Gypsy Travellers site nearby?

The average council-run Gypsy site – and there are hundreds in this country – people don't know they are there. They are pretty well invisible from the outside. Inside they are generally extremely clean and tidy, they are families that have lived together for a very long time. They have immaculate caravans. And they have built day rooms. I wouldn't like to live on one of them but people just adore them, the Travellers adore them. And it's security. And their children can then go to school and integrate into the community. So once they're built, all the research shows, and there has been substantial research on this, all of the enmity tends to dissipate. Of course there are one or two situations where that doesn't happen, and they then become almost invisible.

Finally, how big a problem is the need for sites?

If every borough council in this country gave two or three permissions every year then the problem would cease to exist within four or five years. It's that small a problem. And yet for a borough council to give just one permission means that it's almost World War III. But when a parish council go and visit the family, see the site, often they realise that these are delightful people and once a site has been in position people forget where it is. In the city where I live there is a site at the entrance to that city. It was fought over, tooth and nail, twenty years ago: people said it would become a blight. But if you come into that city today and people say: 'Where's the site? Where's the Gypsy and traveller site?' People say: 'Well, there isn't one.' Even people that live a hundred yards away from it will say: 'Well we don't have one.' And you say: 'Well there is one, by that ambulance station.' 'Oh yeah, of course there is.'

People don't know about it: it causes no problem at all. But there is this huge problem of levering in something that is actually very benign.

'prejudices'

Candy Sheridan, District Councillor North Norfolk

There's no Gypsy or Traveller that hasn't suffered racism. Most of my cousins suffer racism as soon as they open their mouths, as soon as they go into the local shop. And that's what it's like. That's what it's actually like and that's why they stick together in large groups. It's mostly for protection and for security as well.

Henry Wilson, resident, Prees Site

The Rural Media Company

I don't mind people saying: I come from a Traveller background, or I come from a Gypsy background. That's no hell. But I don't like it when they call you Gyppo or just take you for what you are, judging you. Do you know what I mean?

Juliana Crowe Housing Director Rooftop Housing Group

The Gypsy Traveller community are a recognised ethnic minority group. However they are constantly being stigmatised and labelled with titles that you wouldn't dare use for another sector of the community because you know you'd be challenged.

Rachel Jackson, Clerk, Costessey Parish Council

They miss out on education, they miss out on health, their life expectancy is much lower than the general population. You know they have a great deal of hardships in their lives and quite often they also have the aggression of the settled community to deal with as well.

Candy Sheridan, District Councillor North Norfolk

People say to my relatives: 'Why don't you go back to where you're from? Why don't you go back home?' This **is** home. Home is travelling, home is England as well.

Julie Morgan MP, Chair Traveller Law Reform, Westminster

I think it's very important the Government takes a lead and all the agencies, all the agencies that deal with Human Rights of people, the local authorities and the communities themselves must pull together to get rid of this glaring example of how this country is acting in an inhumane way.

Rachael Jackson

We've been able to get to know Travellers. We have been able to talk to them personally. And I think a lot of people out there, with all due respect, have prejudices which are based on hearsay and not based on any knowledge of the Travelling community.

'where we live'

(Sounds of beeping car horns)

Kathleen Jones, Resident Stourport Site

Living on the side of the road is torture. Because you don't get left alone. You are constantly, twenty-four seven, disturbed all the time. If it ain't the police, it's the council. If it ain't the council it's outsiders that's shouting and chucking stones and calling you 'scum' and telling you to move.

Lorna Smith, proprietor Knowle Hill Site

When I saw this place it was just a field. And I saw it advertised as market gardening in the paper and we came to look. And I liked it here and then we found the man that owned it and we bought it off him.

We're not the ones for living in houses. I love the open country as you can see. And I like this place.

We're human beings and I mean, yes, because we want to live differently . . . I don't like to live in a house. I prefer what I got, open air on my doorstep. I'm used to it. That's what I love. And that's why I'm here 'til I die.

Leanne Smith, resident Pinvin Site

On my plot I have this trailer. I have an outer building which is me shower, tumble drier, freezer, toilet. Me cooker because I won't cook in here. It's a bit annoying running in and out with the food when it's raining. But you know, it's just everyday life to me. Then I have a little tourer which my son's got his play things in.

We all sleep in here, that end makes out to a bed, that's me and me husband's bedroom and that's it: that's everything on our plot.

Bobbie Roberts, resident Prees Site

This is the outside building of the bigger sheds here on the site. As you can see they're more larger. This is the living area and kitchen but as you can see in the other buildings . . . these are the larger buildings . . . but in the other buildings (they) are smaller and they haven't got much space. And the kitchens are half the size as this.

So this is the kitchen area where we eat, drink, dine. This bit here, it's all in one, but this is where we normally sit down for dinner and as we come out over here, there's the caravan over there. Would you like to go and see inside?

We come in here mainly for bed time and just a bit of relaxing. We just sit down here and have a bit of a relaxing time. As you can see we don't use cookers or nothing in the caravans: we like to be clean, spotless and have outside in the shed.

Roy Jones, Gypsy Liaison Officer, Shropshire

All my sites are full at present. I have a waiting list of thirty-three people and yes, some of these have gone on into houses, but the reason they went into houses was they had no chance of a plot in the foreseeable future. So they have gone into housing, but would like to come back to their original lifestyle.

Gloria Buckley MBE, site landlord, Norfolk

If somebody says they have got to go and live in houses it would be like me telling you that you've got to get out of the house and live in a caravan. Now we're all different.

Interviewer

Would you even think of moving into a bricks and mortar house? Or would that not suit you?

Bobbie

Oh it wouldn't suit me at all (laughs). I'm used to the windows. If I was in a house now there would be four brick walls around me and that would feel closed in. I wouldn't like it at all. You'd be closed in, you'd feel claustrophobic really wouldn't you? For me anyway.

Interviewer

Have you ever spent a night in a house?

Bobbie

No I haven't no, no I haven't spend a night in a house. (Laughs)

Interviewer

No plans to try it?

Bobbie

No (laughs) no plans to try it.

Kathleen Jones

I love living in a trailer. I think if I had to live in a house I would feel isolated. Four walls around: I'd feel blocked. But living in a trailer you can open your door and you can look out into the open spaces and you can open your curtains, on a site with the people around you that you know; the same people as you are. You feel safe.

Gloria Buckley

We as Gypsy people, if you run a good site – you got rules and you run a good site –they wouldn't know you were there.

'good neighbours'

Mary Wilson, resident Prees Site.

People get on very well in this community. Which we do. We've never had any problems, no problems at all whatsoever. I mean people in Prees – like, my little girl goes to Prees, she goes to, um, Brownies; she does things in school. So if Travellers was a pain they wouldn't have you in would they?

Julie Morgan

The Rural Media Company

We know from the police that they have independently assessed whether the crime rate does go up when Gypsies or Travellers stop in an area and there is absolutely no evidence for this happening.

Jack Hegarty, Managing Director Wychavon District Council

Perceptions are that if you allow a small Gypsy site to be established in your parish or whatever, that may result in increased crime or fly-tipping or anti-social behaviour. In our experience there is no evidence to substantiate those claims whatsoever.

Juliana Crowe

We are very fortunate here in that we have got a small site here in Pinvin and I feel that's a very good example; it's small, it's in a good location, it's well looked after and because of that there's good relationships between people living on this site and the local community.

Dave Hiden, Neighbour Pinvin Site

We got a site up the road, Gypsy site where a lot of people said it would never work and I was one of them. But I've always got on well with the people. They've always given me a lift or I've given them a lift.

Tony Gibbs, Neighbour Pinvin Site

You know they're brilliant. I get on with them perfect. No hassle. I've never had any trouble.

Mary Wilson

It's always been a clean site: it's never been dirty or any rubbish chucked up and down at all. It's always been clean.

Hilary Brotherton, Neighbour Knowle Hill Site

They can't do enough for us. You go down there, they'll always give you something, they're always welcoming.

'part of the community'

Lorna Smith

My son still works out in the fields now but he still pays his tax. Yes and council tax. Yes. So we don't get away with nothing like that.

Candy Sheridan

We pay all sorts of taxes. We are no different to yourselves or anybody else. I think there's a general misconception from years ago. And it's ironic really because when Travellers came to Norfolk years and years ago and worked the fields nobody stopped and said you know: 'What are you doing?'

Because our contribution was much more obvious then. We were actually picking the crops the settled community didn't want to do. We worked long hard hours. My aunts and uncles came over to this country and worked in the fields and nobody complained then. And yet we can't find the work now and we make our own provision. We're all self-employed, a lot of us sort of deal in furniture, we buy and sell, we paint, we're doing tarmac. We're doing the same sort of things, but of course we pay tax. If you work you pay tax.

Juliana Crowe

When a site has been set up the locals quickly find out that their image of what the Travellers are like isn't necessarily true. And they do begin to build relationships with each other, in particular where there are school children and the children are going to be sent to the same school as the local community then those children build bonds, the families build bonds, you know. Because they get to know the Travellers as individuals, as a person: then that fear is no longer there.

Kathleen Jones

I call myself a Gypsy because that's what I am. I work at Stourport High School as a Teaching Assistant with Travelling kids and some of the non-Traveller kids as well.

Candy Sheridan

What I've tried to do is get some of the people to treat Gypsies and Travellers as human being. We are exactly the same and there is a whole generation growing up that is very, very tired, the young Gypsy Travellers, that is very, very tired of being alienated and being kept isolated and they actually want that education. There's whole groups of them that want to attend secondary school. They want to achieve and they want to fit in and we need to actually them do that. We need to be actually part of the general community and not to remain isolated.

'what we need'

Candy Sheridan

There's plenty of local authorities still wasting far too much money on evictions. Evictions are happening every single day. We get plenty of phone calls at the Gypsy Council from families, from Traveller families who say: 'We're being moved on again. We were moved on yesterday. We were moved on the day before. Can you tell me how to stop it?'

We don't have the answer about how to stop every local authority from moving those families on. What we need to do is tackle the local authorities and ask them: why are they wasting their council tax payers' money on moving the same families round and round and round when all they need to do is identify a site and let the family stay there.

Rachel Jackson

If the situation is not resolved and Travellers do not have places where they can either live permanently without being moved on, or where they can go temporarily and move on when they want then the problem is just going to continue with the illegal encampments and all the problems that that entails.

Kathleen Jones

We do need somewhere to live that's legal and safe. That's all we're asking. We're not asking for a billion pound, a billion pound site, you know, that's going to cost the government an arm and a leg. All we're asking is for more sites, for somewhere to live just like every human being in the world that's got a right for somewhere to live. And that's all we ask.

Shane Smith, Resident Worcester Site

I'm living on my Mum's so that when I get married we need some more sites so I can have a plot of my own, just to be clean, tidy, that's what we need.

Jack Hegarty

We have an unresolved, very large issue as far as I'm concerned: we've got one in four of the Gypsy community are still living on unauthorised or, whatever you want to term it, illegal sites, and that statistic is far too high.

Julie Morgan

This is really a very crucial time because I think we all know the outcry that usually happens in a community when there's a proposal for a Gypsy or Traveller site.

Candy Sheridan

It's very difficult being a Gypsy or a Traveller because you're in a no win situation. If you buy land, which Travellers are very willing and able to do, they're very happy to provide for their families, they then start the planning process and what greets them is: 'No. You've paid the money for the land but you can't live on it.'

Roy Jones

Whenever a Traveller site is mentioned or proposed there's always this fear of the uncertainty and the unknown. But I would say for the future generations and the people now please look at the sites that have been up and running with an established record for twenty-five years and see what the success is when you actually get the Travellers to settle down.

Gloria Buckley

The ideal site in a small situation would be five, ten, fifteen camp site pitches.

Steve Blatch, Planning Director, North Norfolk District Council

I think the situation of doing nothing isn't really an option for the authority. The settled community clearly have expectations around enforcement of unauthorised encampments. As traditional places

have been stopped up or access restricted, Gypsies and Travellers have found themselves in more and more unsuitable locations in terms of roadside lay-bys where the health and safety of Gypsy and Traveller families as well as other road users may be compromised.

Jack Hegarty

If you'd come to me five years ago I wouldn't have been confident. I wouldn't have been confident in the planning system to deliver for example. But I think the changes that have been put in place now forces the more reluctant local authorities to take Gypsy and Traveller accommodation and Showmen accommodation much more seriously and incorporate it into their plans so they do provide for the future more adequately, proactively, and willingly for the first time.

Julie Morgan

I think it's up to Government, and I think the leaders in society to take this forward and make sure this awful problem of being homeless doesn't exist.

Gloria Buckley

What would I say if, in twenty years time, we didn't have anywhere legal for these people to stay? I would say: 'Shame on you. And shame on me.'

Rachel Jackson

Somebody has got to at least put out the hand of friendship otherwise the problem is just going to carry on forever.

For more information visit travellerstimes.org.uk

Ends