



**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ACCOMMODATION NEEDS OF
GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS
IN SOUTH AND WEST HERTFORDSHIRE**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**CENTRE FOR URBAN AND REGIONAL STUDIES
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The Study

- S.01 The study area comprises the area of South and West Hertfordshire covered by Dacorum, Hertsmere, St Albans, Three Rivers and Watford councils. The research was commissioned by these district and borough councils together with Hertfordshire County Council, and was carried out by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of Birmingham. The main research took place during the first half of 2004; work in Watford took place in early 2005.
- S.02 The study involved 38 interviews with key policy stakeholders in the Partner authorities and a questionnaire survey of 68 Gypsies and Travellers on eleven sites (public and private, authorised and unauthorised), in houses and on the roadside. Neighbouring local authorities were consulted, as were selected elected members of the Partner authorities and selected local and parish councils in the study area. Secondary data, including local policy documents, and information provided by Hertfordshire County Council Gypsy Section on Gypsy site residents and waiting lists and on unauthorised encampments, was analysed.

Background

- S.03 The study area is located in a part of England which has a relatively high Gypsy and Traveller population (evidence from the bi-annual ODPM Gypsy Caravan Count), and which has experienced above average growth in that population over the past decade. A significant feature in recent years – nationally, regionally and locally – has been the increase in the development of unauthorised sites on Gypsy-owned land without planning permission.
- S.04 The study area itself has experienced rates of growth in the number of Gypsy caravans over the decade which are slightly higher than the region. It is attractive by reason of excellent road links, affluence and proximity to employment opportunities in London and its northern suburbs. The study area is surrounded by local authorities which appear to take a robust stance on enforcement against unauthorised camping and unauthorised site development.
- S.05 Attitudes towards Gypsies and Travellers expressed in the consultation with policy stakeholders, councillors and local/parish councils were generally negative. Gypsies and Travellers are fully aware of the attitudes of members of the settled community towards them and several Gypsy and Traveller interviewees spontaneously referred to the discrimination and harassment that they regularly face.

Main Findings

Local Gypsies and Travellers

- S.06 The study area currently has just over 110 plots on seven residential Gypsy sites owned and managed by Hertfordshire County Council; an HCC transit site at South Mimms with 15 plots; 36 plots on seven authorised private sites; and around 37 families living on unauthorised private sites without planning permission. Two families were on the roadside (one encampment) at the time of the survey. In all there were just under 210 Gypsy/Traveller families on sites or on the roadside at the time of the survey and an unknown number of families in housing.

S.07 The research showed:

- Average family size is around 3.8 persons, significantly larger than the average in the settled community.
- Self employment is important, with groundwork, gardening, tree work and carpet selling most frequently mentioned.
- Almost all families are keen that their children should get a better education and be able to access better employment opportunities than were open to current adults.
- Survey answers suggest a trend towards greater 'settlement' among local Gypsies and Travellers on sites or into houses. Travelling for short periods in the year is thought important to retain cultural identity; all respondents are proud of their cultural identity and heritage.
- The great majority of survey respondents came from previous locations either within or quite close to the study area and can be regarded as broadly 'local'.
- Local Gypsies and Travellers have higher levels of health problems than the settled community. Ill health is a spur to 'settlement' on sites or in houses for some who want to be able to access doctors or hospitals more easily.
- There are no known Roma families from Europe in the study area. Most local families are Gypsies or Irish Travellers.

Traveller Views on Accommodation

S.08 The survey revealed high levels of satisfaction on all sites except the HCC Three Cherry Trees site. Objectively private sites have fewer amenities than HCC residential sites, but resident attitudes are extremely positive. Except on Three Cherry Trees, very few site residents want to move in the next five years. Movement from sites is constrained by places on other authorised sites. Site residents do not want to go back onto the roadside and resume continuous travelling.

S.09 People interviewed on the South Mimms transit site and the roadside travelled throughout the year, but most would like to be more settled and to have a stable base. The difficulty of finding safe places to stop on the road and the importance of getting children into schools were the main reasons given for wishing to 'settle' from a lifestyle of continuous travelling.

S.10 The survey revealed a significant desire among local Gypsies and Travellers to continue living in trailers, mobile homes or chalets on sites. Family-owned private sites are by far the most attractive 'ideal' accommodation option among those currently resident on private sites (authorised and unauthorised). Family-owned private sites are also the most attractive 'ideal' option for a majority of HCC site residents, while others identify council owned sites or owner-occupied or council housing as their ideal.

Unauthorised Camping

- S.11 There were 79 unauthorised encampments in the study area in 1999, involving 906 caravans. The number decreased to 26 (166 caravans) in 2003. Average size of encampment (number of caravans) decreased over this period and was six caravans in 2003. Over the period 1998 to first quarter 2004, Dacorum experienced the highest number of encampments (33%), followed by St Albans (25%), Hertsmere (21%), Watford (14%) and Three Rivers (7%). The reasons for the recent decrease in encampment numbers are not known but may be related to families buying their own sites or finding transit accommodation on private sites (authorised and unauthorised). Enforcement policies adopted by local councils and the police are also likely to have an effect.
- S.12 The roadside families interviewed had very poor living conditions, lacking water, electricity and WC; they wanted to stay in the area and had been moved on several times. They were looking for houses or plots on a council owned site, but did not want to have to mix with other families.

Local Strategies and Policies

- S.13 Hertfordshire County Council has a *Policy for Gypsies and Travellers* (approved in 2000) which refers to education, housing, health, existing and proposed sites, private sites, planning policy, site management issues and managing unauthorised encampments. Partner district councils do not have overall strategies or policies relating to Gypsies and Travellers.
- S.14 The lack of strategic overview of Gypsy/Traveller issues means there is a danger that planning, site provision, housing and unauthorised camping policies are seen separately with each service operating in its own 'silo'.
- S.15 While day-to-day working arrangements are reported to be good between the county and districts on Gypsy/Traveller matters, there is no formal protocol or policy statement of roles and responsibilities. There is no protocol or formal agreement between local authorities and Hertfordshire Constabulary on unauthorised encampments.
- S.16 Apart from initiatives by HCC linked to quality management and ISO 9000, no special arrangements are made by Partner authorities to consult or involve Gypsies and Travellers on policies which affect them. Race Relations legislation requires authorities to consult on impacts of policies on racial groups, to monitor the effect of policies on different ethnic groups, and to publish the results of monitoring and consultation. Gypsies and Irish Travellers are ethnic groups for the legislation.

Accommodation Need and Supply

- S.17 Nationally, there are no signs that growth in the Gypsy/Traveller population will slow significantly. There is every indication that the study area will share in this growth. Older children of Gypsy/Traveller families already in the area will want to form new households and will probably want to stay in the area.
- S.18 The research looked at indications of 'need' against a number of factors, some of which are commonly used in housing need assessments (overcrowding,

demographic growth, health needs, facilities and condition, waiting lists, movement intentions and aspirations) and some of which relate directly to the Gypsy/Traveller lifestyle (unauthorised camping and unauthorised private sites).

- S.19 Over the next five years about **140 families** are identified as 'in need'. The main generators of need are new household formation, the HCC sites waiting list, unauthorised camping and potential displacement from unauthorised private sites without planning permission. On current trends and policies, this need is unlikely to be met since the only source of supply is vacancies arising on HCC sites. Planning policies make the grant of planning permission for private sites very unlikely. Planning controls represent the main constraint on additional site provision at present.
- S.20 In our view, there is a need for more accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers in the study area:
- Site accommodation is mostly required, rather than permanent housing.
 - About **90 additional plots** will be needed on residential sites; up to **35 additional plots** may also be needed to accommodate family formation from existing site residents over the next five years.
 - Of these, perhaps a third should be provided on local authority sites and two-thirds on private sites by Gypsies and Travellers themselves. The balance may be affected by changes in legislation and grant aid in future.
 - Some provision might be achieved through limited extension of existing sites.
 - Small sites seem to work best – with not more than about 15 plots.
 - Depending on size, we estimate that between **8 and 15 new residential sites** will be needed.
 - The provision of **3 additional 10 plot transit sites** would be sufficient to accommodate the great majority of unauthorised encampments if levels remain similar to those experienced over the past five years.
 - A few families want to move into social housing. The study suggests the need for around **6/7 lettings** a year across the study area might suffice.
 - These estimates recognise current shortfalls in site accommodation and need arising over the next five years. Family growth will continue after that and will need continuing attention.
- S.21 Most Gypsies and Travellers interviewed want to remain either where they are or close to that location. Stakeholders in the settled community argue that the fairest approach would be for further site provision to be made in authorities and areas which have not provided so far. Given the size of the study area and its communication links, a 'fair share' approach within the study area seems tenable in general terms, especially if this makes provision more acceptable.

Recommendations

- S.22 The policy framework relevant to Gypsy/Traveller accommodation is complex since it involves site provision, planning, housing and homelessness policies, and policies for managing unauthorised encampments. Local policies must be developed and implemented in the context of human rights and race relations legislation which generally mean that all decisions must be proportionate in weighing the interests and rights of the Travelling and settled communities. Government policy has developed significantly during the course of the research with a new approach of mainstreaming Gypsy and Traveller site provision through housing and planning strategies. Provision is to be planned on the basis of assessments of need for plots.

S.23 A 'status quo' approach to site provision in the study area – retaining existing sites, reacting to planning applications for sites from Gypsies and Travellers and dealing with unauthorised encampments as they arise – is not, in our view, tenable. Identified Gypsy/Traveller needs would be ignored and tensions would continue between Travelling and settled communities. The fact that need has been identified would make it harder to resist planning applications on appeal. A status quo policy might be seen to have a disproportionately negative impact on Gypsies and Irish Travellers and thus be open to challenge under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000.

S.24 We therefore recommend that ***Partner authorities should commit to a more proactive approach to site provision.***

S.25 Other recommendations relating to site provision are:

- ***Partner authorities should plan for the broad level of need identified in this report (see S.20) and should not rely on (hypothetical) provision by other authorities outside the study area.***
- ***Partner authorities should produce a joint strategy relating to Gypsy/Traveller site provision in South and West Hertfordshire and consider the need for a joint Local Development Document under the new planning regime.***
- ***Partner authorities should undertake an exercise to identify sites suitable for development as Gypsy/Traveller sites.***
- ***Partner authorities should consider ways of positively involving local communities and their representatives, including Gypsies and Travellers, in the development of policy and the site finding exercise.***
- ***Partner authorities should consider how best to identify potential sites for development in local planning documents.*** The Consultation Paper 'Planning for Gypsy and Traveller Sites' issued in December 2004 makes clear that local planning authorities will be expected, wherever possible, to identify specific locations for Gypsy and Traveller sites in their plans.
- ***Partner authorities should consider how the accommodation needs of Gypsies and Travellers can be considered along with those of other population groups when any significant urban extensions are planned in future.***
- ***The Partner authorities should develop one new transit site as a pilot scheme and monitor its usage and management in order to learn lessons for further provision.***
- ***Partner district authorities should clearly signal their commitment to further Gypsy/Traveller site provision within their Housing Strategies. Provision would then be made in accordance with prevailing Government policy.*** The Housing Act 2004 requires local authorities to incorporate any identified needs for Gypsy/Traveller pitches in their housing strategies.
- ***All Partner districts should provide/facilitate sites.***

S.26 Recommendations relating to social housing are:

- ***Housing colleagues should be fully involved in all decisions relating to planning and site provision.***
- ***The needs of Gypsies and Travellers should be explicitly recognised in Housing and Homelessness Strategies.***
- ***Gypsies and Travellers should be included as categories in ethnic record keeping, and should be monitored in respect of access to housing and harassment.***
- ***Racial harassment policies should explicitly recognise the potential needs of Gypsies and Travellers.***
- ***Housing managers and HCC site managers should liaise to ensure that advice on lettings policies and procedures is always up-to-date and that site managers can help people through the system.***
- ***Homelessness and allocations policies and procedures should be sensitive to the cultural needs of Gypsies and Travellers.***
- ***Partner authorities should publicise the availability of disabled facility grants among Gypsies and Travellers (the Housing Act 2004 extends grants to caravans).***

S.27 Other recommendations are:

- ***Partner authorities should develop an accommodation strategy for Gypsies and Travellers for South and West Hertfordshire which would inform the site provision strategy and Housing Strategies recommended above and provide a link to other services.***
- ***Partner authorities should enter into a more formal agreement with Hertfordshire Constabulary on the approach to be taken and the respective roles of the County Council, district councils and the police in managing unauthorised encampments.***
- ***The encampment Hotline service run by HCC Gypsy Section should be maintained and district authorities be further encouraged to provide information to the Hotline on all encampments.***
- ***All new policies and procedures which relate to Gypsies and Travellers should be checked for their compliance with the Human Rights Act 1998.***
- ***Partner authorities should refer specifically to Gypsies and Irish Travellers in revised Race Equality Schemes.***
- ***Partner authorities should develop arrangements for fuller involvement of, and consultation with, Gypsies and Travellers in local policy development.***