

Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan Document

Frequently asked questions

A number of general questions were raised in the Issues and Options 2 consultation regarding Gypsy and Travellers, their lifestyles, and issues relating to sites and their delivery.

Who are Gypsies and Travellers?

Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers are defined as minority ethnic groups under the Race Relations Act (1976) and are South Cambridgeshire's largest minority ethnic community, comprising 1% of its population.

The government's definition of Gypsies and Travellers is people with a cultural tradition of nomadism, or living in a caravan, whatever their race or origin, including those that, for reasons such as old age, educational or health needs, have ceased to travel temporarily or permanently.

Travelling Showpeople are separately defined as members of an organised group of travelling showpeople or circus people.

Living in a caravan - a lifestyle choice?

For many Gypsies and Irish Travellers, living in a caravan is not a 'lifestyle choice' but a result of their social and cultural heritage and an essential part of their ethnic identity. This is true whether they are nomadic or settle for long periods in one place.

More Gypsy and Traveller sites needed?

The Council has the same responsibility to plan for the accommodation needs of Gypsies and Travellers as it does for the settled community. Local assessments of accommodation needs of this group have identified a shortage of permanent sites. The Government is changing the planning system and in future it will be for the Council to decide on the level of provision that should be made in the District, reflecting local need and historic demand.

Why not houses instead of sites?

According to the Cambridge Sub-Region Traveller Needs Assessment conducted in 2006, around 40% of Gypsies and Travellers in Cambridgeshire live in houses. Some will move into housing by choice, or for health reasons, or because of a lack of alternative accommodation. However for some families it doesn't work; they feel isolated from their community, and often feel claustrophobic or hemmed in, inside four walls. Everyone should have the opportunity of a decent home that meets their needs, and this includes Gypsies and Travellers who need sites to accommodate caravans.

Why are permanent sites needed?

These days, it is extremely difficult for families to live on the road as they used to. There are fewer places to stop, and also work patterns have changed. Families require safe and secure places from which to do their travelling. This will also be where they can access a doctor, dentists and crucially where their children have better access to education. As Gypsies and Travellers grow older and become less able to travel on a regular basis, some require a safe and secure stopping place where they can maintain the cultural traditions of being a Gypsy or Traveller.

What is a pitch and how many live people live on it?

A pitch is the space required to accommodate one household and will vary according to the size of the household in a similar way to housing for the settled community. A caravan does not equate to a household. One household may comprise three generations of extended family living in several caravans. The Cambridge Sub Region Traveller Needs Assessments found an average of 2.39 persons per caravan (2 on council sites), and 1.65 caravans per household. Typically a family pitch will provide space for a mobile home and touring caravan, space for parking, and an amenity block.

Do Gypsies and Travellers pay Council Tax, Rent and Charges?

Authorised Gypsy and Traveller sites are charged Council tax the same as other residential dwellings. South Cambridgeshire has the joint highest Council tax collection rate for district councils in the country, at 99.3%. Gypsies and Travellers who live on Council or privately-owned sites are subject to council tax, rent, gas, electricity and other associated charges in the same way as other residents.

Are Gypsies and Travellers responsible for antisocial behaviour like fly-tipping, loose dogs, and crime?

Well managed and well run Gypsy and Traveller sites do not generally cause trouble to the local settled community. Criminal justice agencies do not collect information about separate ethnic groups but there is no evidence that offending is any higher among these groups than among others. The police serve areas with Gypsy and Traveller sites in the same way as other areas.

Assumptions regarding crime or antisocial behaviour of occupants are not material planning considerations. This has been confirmed in a recent legal case where it was held that fear had to have a reasonable basis and the object of that fear had to be the use of the land. A caravan site was not inherently likely to cause difficulties to neighbours and it was wrong to take the view that the use of land as a Gypsy site created the same concern as that attached for example to an institution such as a bail hostel.

Would sites cause litter problems?

The Council's waste collection vehicles collect waste from authorised Gypsy and Traveller sites as they do other residential development. Draft policies included in the last consultation would require appropriate access for waste vehicles, and provision for the screened storage of waste including recycling.

More unauthorised sites in the area?

The provision of sites in order to appropriately meet accommodation needs will reduce the need for unauthorised sites. The Council will apply planning rules relating to unauthorised sites.

Will a site reduce house prices nearby?

Clearly on this issue every site is different in respect of its locality and surroundings. However, an independent study in Scotland (by the Planning Exchange and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation) found that although there were some claims that house prices would be affected, these proved hard to establish. It said 'a new home being built within 50 metres of the boundary of one site suggested the impact on local housing market had been minimal'. Experiences in other areas do not evidence a reduction in property values near to sites once operating well. In addition, whether a proposal has an effect on land or house values, be that positive or negative, is not a material planning consideration and cannot be used as a reason to rule out a site.

How to address community relations?

There are existing Gypsy and Traveller sites around the district where Gypsy and Travellers take an active role in their local communities. The Council's Gypsy and Traveller Community Strategy aims to contribute towards Gypsies and Travellers and the settled community living alongside each other peacefully as part of strong, cohesive communities.

Why do sites need to be so accessible?

When planning residential development the starting point is always to look at the most sustainable locations. The same is true for Gypsy and Traveller sites. Access to schools, doctors and shops will help to reduce inequalities.

Shouldn't pitches be scattered amongst other development rather than grouped?

Whilst some pitches are single family pitches, the preference of Gypsies and Travellers is for small groups of pitches, where friends and family are able to live together.

Will businesses, such as scrap metal be allowed on site?

Gypsy and Traveller sites are residential rather than mixed-use employment sites. Employment uses would require separate planning consent. This is the experience of the Council's existing sites, where Gypsies and Travellers typically return to the site after working elsewhere. Conditions can be imposed on any planning permission to restrict commercial activities on site.

What jobs do Gypsies and Travellers do?

Similar to the settled community, Gypsies and Travellers work in a range of occupations. Traditional patterns of work, such as seasonal agricultural work, are changing. The range of jobs undertaken by Gypsies and Travellers is now more diverse.

Are we meeting local Gypsy and Traveller needs or those from elsewhere?

Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessments identify need from people living in unauthorised sites or sites with only temporary planning permission in the District. They identify where existing sites in the District are overcrowded, and also include an allowance for family growth, the same as for settled communities. In this way they identify need generated in the District. However, in the same way as members of the settled community, Gypsies and Travellers may decide they wish to live in a different area so people will come and go.

Who owns Gypsy and Traveller sites?

Gypsy and Traveller sites may be in public or private ownership in the same way as other housing. Public sites are typically managed by local authorities or housing associations, and provide affordable rented accommodation for those that cannot afford to buy their own pitch. There are two existing public sites in the district, owned by the County Council but managed by the District Council. Private sites are privately owned, and either owner occupied or rented out.

How would the Council ensure sites are properly managed?

The Council currently successfully runs two sites, at Milton and Whaddon. The aim is to ensure high standards of management and support, equal to those available to tenants in other forms of social accommodation. They are overseen by the Council's Gypsy and Traveller Team Leader.

Who pays for new sites?

Private sites would be privately owned, and privately funded by Gypsies and Travellers themselves. Public sites could be delivered in a similar way to affordable housing.

Why provide new sites in response to illegal actions of those on unauthorised sites?

The Council has the same responsibility to plan for the accommodation needs of the Gypsy and Traveller communities as it does for the settled community. There is an identified need for new site provision.

Retrospective planning permission

A retrospective application is an application for planning permission that occurs after the use of land or the construction of a building has already happened. Rules regarding retrospective planning applications apply equally to Gypsy and Traveller sites and any other form of development. The planning application still has to go through the due process and it would not be lawful to refuse an otherwise acceptable application solely because it is retrospective.

Should the plan make separate provision for Irish Travellers and English Gypsies?

Throughout the documents sites have been identified in land use terms, suitable for provision of Gypsy and Traveller pitches as defined by Circular 01/2006. No distinction can be made in planning terms as to whether a site is suitable for a particular ethnic group.

Why can Gypsy and Traveller sites be in the countryside when other development is not allowed?

Planning law applies equally to Gypsies and Travellers as it does to the settled community. The need for sites is being considered through the Local Development Framework in the same way need for houses and other uses are considered. Planning applications are tested against national guidance and local development plans the same as other forms of development.

There are some policy differences in national planning guidance that reflect the nature of the use, for example sites for Gypsies and Travellers can be found in the countryside. However, Green Belt policy also applies and Gypsy and Traveller sites in the Green Belt are normally inappropriate development. Alternatives should be explored before Green Belt locations are considered, and this approach was reflected in the site option identification process.

Why provide sites where there is public transport as Gypsies and Travellers don't use buses?

Use of public transport amongst Gypsies and Travellers has been noted to be low. However, many existing sites are located where public transport provision is relatively poor. By providing sites in more accessible locations, it will offer the residents better opportunities to access public transport and other services and facilities, in the same way that we would plan to meet the needs of the settled community.

Problems Caused by Unauthorised Sites

Many representations have mentioned experiences of unauthorised encampments in their comments. Unauthorised encampments are unplanned and temporary in nature, often located in inappropriate locations, and in the past have led to problems and local tensions. Provision of permanent sites, tested through the planning process, and either privately owned or managed, allow environmental issues to be properly considered and addressed.