



COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE FOR NEW LOCAL AUTHORITY AND OTHER SOCIALLY RENTED TRAVELLER SITES

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF GYPSY AND TRAVELLER OFFICERS



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CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION
2. WHAT IS YOUR LOCAL NEED?
3. WHAT AUTHORISED SITES DO YOU OWN, RUN, AND HOW IS IT DONE? HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH UNAUTHORISED ENCAMPMENTS AND SITES?
4. WHERE DO YOU START WITH A SITE PROPOSAL?
5. PLANNING ISSUES, SITE DESIGN AND FUNDING
6. ESTABLISHING YOUR GOAL
7. WHAT ABOUT TRANSIT SITE PROPOSALS?
8. WHAT IF YOU ARE PROPOSING A TEMPORARY ARRANGEMENT, LIKE A TEMPORARY STOPPING PLACE
9. LIST STAKEHOLDERS
10. YOU HAVE GOT YOUR PLAN, WHAT IS THE MESSAGE?
11. ENGAGING AND PUTTING OVER THE PROPOSAL AND YOUR MESSAGES
12. PUBLIC MEETINGS
13. MAKING PROMISES
14. PLANNING AND CONSULTEES

PLEASE NOTE: In this Guide, the expression “Traveller” is used as shorthand to describe sites and pitches which are designed for and used by “gypsies and travellers”. That expression, with lower case initial, is used in legislation to describe those who are entitled to live on such sites. The expression includes many, but not all, who are Gypsies or Travellers, which are the racial or ethnic descriptions. There is continuing debate about the legal and other issues involved.

1. INTRODUCTION

This short communications guide is for local authorities, Registered Providers and other Traveller Site Providers in England to use when thinking about developing a permanent or transit site/ temporary stopping place for Gypsies, Travellers and Travelling Show people. We have seen from local press and social media sites and have heard from a few Gypsy & Traveller Liaison officers how difficult it can be to get people on side and to get the message out about the benefits of sites, including savings from using transit sites and temporary stopping places, including the negotiated stopping model details at <https://www.negotiatedstopping.co.uk/resources> instead of dealing with the potentially high costs of unauthorised encampments. We know there is really good and best practice out there, so we want to share it amongst all interested local authorities and Registered Providers.

Socially Rented caravan site accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers is provided by a range of individuals and organisations in England. These are mainly local authorities, an increasing number are Registered Providers (Registered by Homes England) and a few are companies and others running the sites on behalf of, or by agreement with, local authorities, where the allocation of pitches is done on the same basis as for a local authority.

That means there are a variety of models available for delivering necessary site provision.

Just over 300 sites, containing over 5,000 pitches, and a total caravan capacity of over 8,000 (most pitches can take two caravans, even if just one is there) offer socially rented accommodation to traveller and gypsy (according to English Law; popularly Gypsy and Traveller) families. Just under 300 are transit pitches, with much shorter security of tenure, because they are for short-term stays only.

Finally, there are a range of arrangements which allow caravans to be temporarily, and lawfully, on land. These may be called temporary stopping places, “negotiated stopping”, authorised encampments and tolerated sites. Or something similar. Almost all are set up and managed by local authorities, usually, and for success, working closely with other local public sector bodies. Some places for short stays, like all Transit Sites, are reported for the national count data. Other arrangements are not, and are much more temporary and informal, and can be ended, if necessary, quite or very quickly.

2. WHAT IS YOUR LOCAL NEED?

“Need” for socially provided accommodation can always be difficult to assess. Importantly, it is different from, but connected to, “demand”, but when you are planning a site, you want to ensure both are evidenced. But before you pursue any permanent site plans, you need a recent robust assessment of need for gypsies and travellers and travelling showpeople, which may be through a gypsy and traveller accommodation assessment https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/7838/accommneedsassessments.pdf for the 2007 Government Guidance and <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/resource/best-practice-for-assessing-the-accommodation-needs-of-gypsies-and-travellers/> for the shorter 2016 Guide by Friends, Families and Travellers, carried out by in-house or, more likely, external consultants who are experienced, producing sound data. Without it, you will struggle to convince people living near a proposed site that it is required at all. Just as with housing, it is vital that the occupiers of any accommodation have a good relationship with their neighbours. Equally, those local people should not be able to prevent a good site proposal going forward by saying that they refuse to have a good relationship with people they do not know, in advance.

3. WHAT AUTHORISED SITES DO YOU OWN, RUN, AND HOW IS IT DONE? HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH UNAUTHORISED ENCAMPMENTS AND SITES?

What is reported to happen on (including through social media, now) and how you manage both authorised sites and unauthorised sites, or even how adjacent authorities run them, will be the model that anyone objecting to a site will refer to. Make sure that you know exactly how they are managed, what the issues have been, and how they have been addressed. You may well need to improve the management of other sites before you can argue for a new one with authority and conviction.

It is vital that, with any new site proposal, those being asked to support it have confidence in the management arrangements, and managers, of it, and can ask questions of them.

Local authorities owning, allocating pitches on, or otherwise running sites should have effective communication channels to the public, including both the GRT and settled Community, about authorised sites and unauthorised encampments which prevents, or at least challenges, negative publicity on social media and in the local press. These include:

- Clear information on the local authority website about current authorised socially rented pitches and contact details of the site manager, and details of how to apply for a pitch.

- live data on current unauthorised encampments in the area and their status, without any personal information, to reduce the number of complaints from the public to the LA contact centre and local councillors.
- If live data is not available, then regular up to date information should be placed on the local authority website so people know what the current situation is and have a named contact.
- a weekly update on the website and to key partners such as local GRT voluntary and community sector organisations, resident groups, Parish, District and County Councillors, the Police, the Police and Crime Commissioners and surrounding teams in adjoining counties
- Have a positive intervention policy with the local media. Send Council statements as soon as an unauthorised encampment is established with positive messages to prevent any escalation or misunderstandings from the public. It is never good to have a published line in the media “We have contacted the Council for a statement but have yet to receive a response”

4. WHERE DO YOU START WITH A SITE PROPOSAL?

There are considerable, in some cases enormous, benefits in authorised site provision, just as there are similar benefits in housing provision. This is evidenced by various research and reports over the years; The National Housing Policy Advisory Panel on Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation, supported by the National Housing Federation and Chartered Institute of Housing, recently published best practice guidance on site design and management ‘Places we’re proud of’ Gypsies and Travellers

https://issuu.com/rooftop1/docs/places_we_re_proud_of and the managing and delivering Gypsy and Traveller Sites negotiating conflict guide by Professor Jo Richardson and Janie Codona MBE <https://www.dmu.ac.uk/documents/research-documents/business-and-law/jrf-travellers-gypsies-report.pdf>

It contains a wealth of practice on site management and site delivery, including overcoming challenges that occur, to maintain safe and peaceful sites.

There is also, separate but linked to the above, the extensive experience of many members of the National Association of Gypsy and Traveller Officers, who have literally hundreds of years of experience of the subject between them.

Most of the existing sites for Travellers, provided by local authorities and a few Registered Providers and similar, provide safe and secure accommodation, and enable those living on them to have as settled an existence as they choose, accessing health and education and other services for themselves and their families, and having the benefits of a fixed address which helps ease access to GP practices, financial services and being able to vote. It also helps those families who are settled on a site to act as a postal address and base for others in their families who are travelling, at any time. And it enables individuals within those families to benefit, if they need it, and discreetly, if they need that, from continuing support and health care from the same local providers whom they trust. And it helps people who live locally to the site, and who are other school parents, for example, to get to know and have good relationships with those who live on the site nearby. The benefits to community cohesion, and to protection from harm, can be considerable.

Children access local schools, or are educated at home. Everyone in a family can access the variety of local health services, and enjoy easier access and consistent care more easily than those who travel frequently, although that is just as valid a lifestyle. People who live on

a permanent residential site for some time often get to know neighbours of the site, and businesses, and build up useful and important relationships to all.

The management of those sites is carried out either by local authorities direct, or by Registered Providers on their behalf, usually. The excellent “Gypsy and Traveller Site Management: Good Practice Guide” (2009), downloadable currently from the Guildford BC website, provides a whole range of useful advice and examples. The Mobile Homes Act 1983 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1983/34/> in a slightly varied form from that printed from the link, has applied since 2011 to all socially rented Traveller sites provided by local authorities. The Act, unmodified, applies to sites, not both specifically for Travellers and owned by local authorities. “Chapter 2” terms, under the relevant Mobile Homes Act 2013 order, apply to LA site residential pitches; “Chapter 4” terms apply to LA site transit pitches. In residential pitch cases, it gives pitch occupiers security of tenure, unless they breach the agreement in a way that is so serious and/or cannot be remedied and the proper process results in their eviction. In such cases, the same law now applies as would apply to anyone on any Caravan or Mobile Home Park, whether Traveller or not.

The Mobile Homes Act 1983 applies to England and Wales, but not Northern Ireland, and the law is different in Scotland.

That means that the basic terms (called “implied terms”) in pitch agreements apply to all those who live on permanent pitches on local authority Traveller sites. Different implied terms, with minimal security of tenure, apply to transit pitches.

If there are complaints, they need to be responded to and addressed. Site residents will be treated with respect, but expected to comply with pitch agreements in the same way as tenants in any other accommodation. Ultimately, eviction is an available last resort.

When considering your site proposal, think of all the benefits of having a site, to those who will live on it, neighbours of current unauthorised encampments those residents may now be living on, and perhaps also the extensive cost savings for your council in not having to manage and perhaps regularly evict as many encampments as now. Various authorities have examples of extensive savings, and the win-win benefits of well-managed and successful permanent residential, transit or (as mentioned above) mixed sites.

You need a clear picture of what your goal is, and how you will arrive at it. It is not just about establishing a site, against what may be strong opposition. It is a well-designed and durable and well-constructed site, in a good location where anyone else might enjoy living, meeting clear accommodation needs, which is primarily self-managed by the values of the people, selected through a clear and fair selection process, who live on it, but supported by the management of whoever manages it, and with, broadly, the same access to services, including police, as other communities locally. It is a site where positive and enduring relationships can develop between those who live on the site, and neighbours, including businesses and organisations and individuals within the area. It is a site, and there are already many, probably most, of them across England, where site residents and local people enjoy the excellent or very good reputation that the site enjoys. It is likely to be a site which attracts good or minimal publicity, or certainly only rarely, if at all, negative publicity. There are no places where people live which can guarantee never to have bad publicity.

5. PLANNING ISSUES, SITE DESIGN AND FUNDING

There are three key factors which should feature in your initial plans.

Planning is covered in section 14 below. The quality of the location for any new site is very critical to its approval and ultimate success. See Section 10 below, third bullet point.

Site Design is about the quality of fitting your planned site into the surrounding terrain, and making it a pleasant and durable place to live. The Site Design Guide from 2007 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/11439/designinggypsiesites.pdf is still useful reference.

A recent advisory document from the Scottish Government may be helpful: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/interim-gypsy-traveller-site-design-guide/>

Make it clear how big the site is proposed to be. Make it clear (if necessary, with recorded promises) that there will be no expansion for at least x years, but make sure that is a reasonable period, not something that prevents expansion, when needs for further pitches are justified, and the site is working well.

Don't produce very detailed designs at too early a stage. Consultees and others interested need to have an idea what the site will be like, as do potential applicants for it, but you need to get the principle and planning of the site agreed first, then work up the details.

Boundaries with adjacent land are important. You need to show how the boundaries of the site will be maintained, and the neighbours' interests protected. Also, important to include measures to prevent and resist fly-tipping. Avoid spare areas without specific purpose, which could be open to abuse, in the design. Avoid designing in areas which could be open to abuse by anyone and avoid hard boundary treatments that give the appearance of segregating the residents from the adjacent settled community (e.g. high walls and hedges).

Funding for new English pitches, or improvements for existing, can be bid for by local authorities from the newly announced Traveller Sites Fund. Bids deadline for that Fund is 13th June 2022. Details at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/traveller-site-fund-202223> Or from Homes England, as part of the broader Affordable Homes Programme: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/affordable-homes-programme-2021-to-2026>

6. ESTABLISHING YOUR GOAL

It is worth writing down your goals right at the beginning. Worth specifying the emphases on a pleasant and safe community, access to facilities, and community safety and community cohesion, and drawing in the general guidance for creating new and safe communities. The same approaches, with a few tweaks for the fact that people live in mobile homes or caravans, apply as for any other new development. It is people - adults, children, families who will live there, and their wishes, needs, dreams are the same as people living in other forms of socially rented accommodation, and those who live in any form of accommodation.

Local authority and related staff need to engage, and make your case, with all local communities, from the outset, in working up your plans. That includes communities linked by their geography, as well as other characteristics. It includes the community of people who

may wish to apply for a pitch on a new site, as well as those who live on other sites, private and public, in your area.

You may already have good links with the overall GRT communities. If not, or you want to widen the contact, the best way to reach GRT communities is through voluntary and community organisations and local authority officers who have experience of working with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, and who are also trusted and respected by all the local community.

You need to appeal to an audience that includes those who know some Travellers personally, those who don't, those who have had good experiences and those who have had bad experiences. For most of those audiences, include those within GRT communities. They, too, have a variety of experiences of others. You need to respond, with firmness but understanding, to the fears and prejudice that people may bring, answer all the questions you can, as soon as you can, and maintain a calm and measured approach, even if all around are losing theirs. The exchanges should be civil and respectful to everyone's dignity.

You need to demonstrate a firm and fair location, design and management proposal. You need to show you have plans for how people will apply for pitches, and be considered, or how you will otherwise regulate access to the site, and the management with and of people who live on it.

You need, before you make the proposal public, to have a robust case to convince both politicians and local people that the site will be well-established and well-managed, you have adequate resources to manage any serious problems that arise, and you also have a sound system for recovering payments for stay on it from those who move there.

You may need to hold some awareness raising sessions for officers and councillors and the public. Many VCS (Voluntary and Community Sector) organisations can run them for local authorities and some organisations run web-based training.

7. WHAT ABOUT TRANSIT SITE PROPOSALS?

You need to engage in the same way, but also anticipate and respond to the understandable fears of local people about a range of people that they don't know who would be stopping on a proposed transit site.

People protesting about any site are unlikely to know the people who will come to live on it, but with a transit site, the people will keep changing, so there won't be the same chance for local people and local businesses to get to know them.

Some examples of transit sites currently operating successfully are, north to south:

Runcorn, Cheshire (Halton Borough)

Warrington Road Transit Site, Runcorn, Cheshire WA7 1DQ (managed by Cheshire and Warrington Traveller Team, contact number 0300 123 7727)

Brighton

Horsdean Travellers' Site, St Michael's Way, Brighton BN1 8AZ (managed by Brighton and Hove Council, contact number 01273 292044; travellers@brighton-hove.gov.uk)

Lewes, East Sussex

Bridies Tan, Southerham Lane, Lewes, East Sussex BN8 6DY (managed by East Sussex County Council, contact number 01273 481340)

8. WHAT IF YOU ARE PROPOSING A TEMPORARY ARRANGEMENT, LIKE A TEMPORARY STOPPING PLACE?

Again, such proposals are best worked up with involvement from those who will be affected by them. You need to show why the temporary stopping place, or similar arrangement is necessary, and that the overall benefits to everyone involved (residents, neighbours, businesses nearby) clearly outweigh the disadvantages. The projected impact from any new provision, and from any activities foreseen from occupants, should arguably be no different from any new development.

You also need to be clear that such a proposal is for a temporary arrangement, you need to specify what that temporary period is, whether you want to extend it if it works well, how you will ensure that the living space is decent even after extreme weather conditions, and how you will bring the arrangement to an end, and restore the land to its previous use, or a planned future use.

You will need to explain why this proposal is not “the thin end of the wedge” for getting a permanent site established, so that you don’t lose the support of local people who may support a temporary arrangement, but not a permanent one. You will also need to make sure you have the right to occupy the land and any necessary planning or other consents in place. You will need to work out the risks.

Consider the possible benefits of having a temporary stopping place on land which is awaiting development, or where the occupants can help prevent abuse of the land by fly-tipping and similar, which could otherwise be expensive to your council.

An example of communication materials that local authorities already use are here:

<https://www.durham.gov.uk/media/7344/Unauthorised-Encampment-Procedure/pdf/UnauthorisedEncampmentProcedure20201.pdf?m=637726617349770000>

Some Temporary Stopping Places and a TSOA which operate successfully:

County Durham

Gurney Valley Temporary Stop-Over Area, DL14 8RP What 3 words: feels, scans, debit
Tel: 03000 260 000
e-mail: grtservice@durham.gov.uk

North Norfolk

Cromer Temporary Stopping Place, Holt Road, Cromer, Norfolk, NR27 9GH
Tel: 01263 513 811
E-mail: ep@north-norfolk.gov.uk

Fakenham Temporary Stopping Place, Holt Road, Fakenham, Norfolk, NR21 8LZ
Tel: 01263 513 811
E-mail: ep@north-norfolk.gov.uk

9. LIST STAKEHOLDERS

Think widely, and list all those who have a legitimate interest and involvement with the site proposal. Don’t forget the landowner of the land, anyone else with land interests in it, and

anyone else who could or would be directly affected by the provision of the site. Include key councillors, key leaders of influential local organisations, amongst your list such as:

- Reps from all layers of Local government for the location, including any County or ward members, and MP
- Local residents' association (if no Town or Parish Council)
- Prospective residents of the proposed site
- Those designing the Proposed site
- Those who will manage the proposed site
- Organisations representing local GRT communities
- Fire Service
- Police
- Local Schools
- Health Service providers
- Local Trade Association, or those representing local business
- Local Media organisations

10. YOU HAVE GOT YOUR PLAN, WHAT IS THE MESSAGE?

You need to have good and credible answers to the questions which will be raised, which are likely either to be many, or very many.

Examples of these questions may include:

- How many pitches are required?
- How many pitches, and caravans or mobile homes will be catered for on any proposed site?
- Why should it be this proposed site, at this location? This is the biggest question, and a whole further guide could be produced just on the subject of how sites are selected.
- What local services, schools, doctors' surgeries, shops etc are likely be used by those who live on this site, if developed? (Think much wider than the immediate area; people can choose the services they use, including education and sometimes health services)
- Why does this proposed site meet planning considerations, highways access and related matters, is it in a local plan?
- Who owns the land, has the authority considered all its own landholdings first?
- Is this the best site available, and what are the details of all other sites considered?
- Who will manage the site? Why should people have confidence in their management, whether site residents or local people? What experience do they have, of managing sites generally, and one of this size?
- What are the policies on management? What system will be used to allocate pitches? How will difficult and dangerous people be prevented from living on or resorting to the site? What happens if some of those people start living on someone else's pitch, on the quiet?
- What arrangements and relationship exist between the managers of the site and local and area Police and other agencies, to respond to problems which happen? Are there any known conflicts between likely residents? How will they be managed?
- What risk assessment has been carried out over the site proposal, and how will identified risks be managed successfully, to minimise local impact?
- How will overcrowding on the site be prevented, either excessive caravans, people or both?

- What are the long-term plans for the Education and Health of site occupants and which current facilities will primarily meet those needs?
- (If possible, without breaching people's privacy) Where are the families now who will likely occupy the site?

Expect rigorous examination, scrutiny and reasonable challenge to your site plans, which is quite understandable, and legitimate. Also, in this era, expect there may well be fears, panic, and both rational and irrational and reasonable and unreasonable challenge, including on social media. The response to social media, and management of messages to it, is a vital point, and should be managed from a single point in your authority.

Choose staff who are experienced with communications, and the public, to make your case. They, and you, need to approach discussions with the public and stakeholders as ways of testing the principles of the proposed site and the plans, and, if they are good, improving them further, even if it feels like it is just negative and sustained pressure!

11. ENGAGING AND PUTTING OVER THE PROPOSAL AND YOUR MESSAGES

You need to reach a range of audiences. Those who live, have business premises, walk their dogs, exercise, or otherwise have contact with the place where the site is planned. Those who live in the wider area around it. Those who live nowhere near the proposed site but either want to pitch in against the idea, or in favour of it. Those who represent or interact with any of those people as councillors, business associations, church groups.

These are just some of the audiences. It is well worth mapping all the audiences you identify, also anticipating petitions and other protests and objections from a mixture of signatories through facebook resident groups and other local social media sites.

12. PUBLIC MEETINGS

It is usually better to organise one or more public meetings yourselves, as promoters of the site proposal, rather than let others either hold their own meetings (though clearly any group of people can meet separately) or invite people from the promoters to theirs.

Face to face meetings work better than online engagement and other written methods of communication, as there can be low levels of literacy within some sections of the settled and traveller populations.

You will need to ensure that the meetings are held in easily accessible locations, well publicised in different formats, and are held in both formal and informal surroundings to ensure a greater degree of participation by the community.

Make sure you have the people to answer the likely questions raised. Make sure that the people responsible for the management of the site are at all meetings, ready to explain how they manage any existing sites, respond to problems and so on.

But make sure that individuals, not at the meeting, are not mentioned in discussions, without their consent. Situations and general history can be mentioned, but don't get into a debate or argument about "x difficult family or difficult individuals", for example. Don't forget, ever, people recording discussions or meetings, by video (which is likely more obvious) or audio, which may not be.

Don't forget the benefits of smaller meetings, with relevant stakeholders, on specific issues, where people can be heard and information exchanged. You will need to hold numerous meetings to ensure that you're not engaging with a small number of people from the community who claim that they represent the views of the whole community.

It is very important to manage any meetings legally and respectfully, for the benefit of all who attend. It is important to give both the site promoters - and those concerned, supporting or opposing - the chance to have their say, within the law, and be listened to.

All respectful, if heartfelt, questions, reflecting fears, worries and curiosity, are legitimate!

Record (if agreed by those attending, and technically possible) any meetings, or have someone record in writing all questions asked. Agree who has a chance to access any meeting recording.

Be transparent and assume anything you do or say is in public, as even the most confidential meeting or discussion may be revealed on social media or in the press.

Avoid having discussions or meetings, while a proposal is going forward, which suggest that the proposal might be, or is going to be, abandoned, until any decision is made.

Do a note of any meeting that the promoters organise. Welcome any record of any other meeting you are not invited to, if good points are raised.

If the site promoters cannot answer a question at a meeting, promise to provide a reply, and put the question and its answer into the note of the meeting.

Have a strong person to chair, ideally locally known and respected, for the public meeting, not someone who has a direct stake in the site or strong views in either direction that they want to express in the meeting. They need to be chairing impartially, welcoming all relevant debate and discussion, and having authority to deal with what may be lively or even occasionally violent discussion.

13. MAKING PROMISES

Should you make promises (for example about the maximum numbers of caravans allowed on a pitch, about extra tree screening, about not increasing the site size, other things that are raised during the discussions)?

Yes, if they do not inhibit the good operation of the site, if agreed. But remember that only promises which are formally included as conditions on the planning consent (and are proper planning matters) will have long-term effect, legally. Beware of making promises that are not then delivered, and which cause rancour later.

It is unwise to make a promise about closing a site "if it does not work". You would not be likely to do so for social housing. Unless a site is no longer used, or cannot be operated legally, or the police force advice is to close it down, sites should not be closed if the problems are the activities of certain people on the site, which should be dealt with by the police and criminal law options, and injunctions, if necessary, against named or identified individuals. It happens very rarely, but it is a fair question for people to ask.

14. PLANNING AND CONSULTEES

Whoever is promoting a new development or change of the use of land requiring planning consent needs to follow the rules for planning consultation. Once a planning application is received by a local authority it will be subject to the regulatory requirements for dealing with a planning application. This includes consultation with statutory and other consultees. Local authorities also have a requirement to consult and engage the local community in accordance with their Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). As approaches to consultation and engagement vary from authority to authority the promoter of a development

is encouraged to discuss any proposed pre-application consultation directly with the local authority concerned.

Planning officers usually handle questions, replies to them and objections on planning grounds. But they ask others to provide the technical detail to help their answers. Make sure all of those promoting the site are working closely together. Reply to all questions honestly, and as fully as required. If you don't know the answer, reply like that. Say you will find out the answer ASAP. If people mock you because you don't know an answer, resist the temptation to be diverted or drawn, maintain calm body language and say you will reply with a set short timescale, so they get accurate information.

As anything changes, make sure you get the changes notified.

If people raise objections that are not planning ones, still reply, but point out to them what is considered as planning matters. If their submissions appear to breach the law, weigh up the need to ask them to withdraw them, ignore them or, in extreme cases, say you will be referring them for investigation and possible prosecution.

This Guide, first published late April 2022, has been co-ordinated by NAGTO, the National Association of Gypsy and Traveller Officers, with help from

Jim Alexander, Mat Bagley, Bill Forrester, Claire Hoskins, Moona Hassan, Adrian Jones, James Mills, Sheila Peters, Rachel Pinchin, Jo Richardson, Louise Stokoe, Dawn Taylor and lots of excellent practice by many others who have gone before.

Suggestions for improvement, and more examples of excellent practice are very welcome. Please send to billforrester57@hotmail.co.uk