

Last on the list: An overview of unmet need for pitches on Traveller sites in England

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According to the Government's own figures, 1035 Traveller caravans are located on unauthorised encampments in England, although this is widely thought to be an underestimate¹. In the coming weeks, the Home Office is due to launch the Government's response to its consultation on increasing police powers to evict Gypsies and Travellers from unauthorised encampments and the criminalisation of trespass².

This could make trespass and unauthorised encampments a crime resulting in prison, a fine or a family's home being taken from them. However, the vast majority of people living on unauthorised encampments have no other place to go. To illustrate this, on 26th October 2020, we wrote to all Local Authorities and Private Registered Providers in England to enquire about pitch availability and waiting list length on their sites³. We found that at the time of our research there were:

- Only 13 permanent sites and five transit sites with any available pitches for Gypsy and Traveller families in all of England.
- Only 59 available permanent pitches in total for Travellers in all of England.
- Only 42 available transit pitches in total for Travellers in all of England.
- At least 1696 households on waiting lists for pitches on Traveller sites in England.

This means that under the Government's proposals, the vast majority of people living on unauthorised encampments could face prison, a fine or the removal of family home for the "crime" of having nowhere else to go.

Context

Gypsies and Travellers have lived in England and practiced a nomadic way of life since before the 16th Century. Nomadism is an important feature of the histories and cultures of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller members of our society, as well as an important way in which many people find work and economic security.

Although nomadism has been present in England for centuries, the Government has largely failed to accommodate the nomadic way of life, which means that over 3000 families in England have no legal and safe place to stop⁴.

In England, the responsibility for identifying land where Traveller sites can be built largely falls down to local authorities. Local authorities are meant to carry out

Map showing all Traveller sites with available pitches in England



¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/848868/TCC_November19_Stats_Release.pdf

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/strengthening-police-powers-to-tackle-unauthorised-encampments>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/traveller-caravan-count#2020>

⁴ Ibid

accommodation needs assessments of people residing or resorting to their district, including Gypsies and Travellers, to identify accommodation needs of nomadic groups. In producing their local plan, local authorities should then identify and update a supply of specific deliverable sites sufficient to provide 5 years' worth of sites against their locally set targets and developable sites for years 6-10.

The local plan is then assessed by an inspector allocated by the Planning Inspectorate to check if it is sound and legally compliant, meeting the local authority's planning duties. Following this, local authorities should build sites and/or consider applications for Traveller sites in accordance with their local plan, taking into consideration need for sites, applicants' personal circumstances and more. However, our previous research shows that only 8 out of 68 local planning authorities in the South East of England were meeting their identified need for pitches for the next 5 years and the figures are similar across the country⁵.

Despite the chronic shortage of Traveller sites available, there are little or no repercussions for local authorities who consistently fail to identify any land for Gypsy and Traveller people to live on in their area. As a result, those who fail to secure a pitch to live on are evicted from pillar to post at the whim of local authorities and the police. In addition, families living on roadside camps are often forced to live with intermittent access to water and sanitation and can struggle to access healthcare and the education system.

Between November 2019 and March 2020, the Home Office held a consultation on increasing police powers to evict Gypsies and Travellers from unauthorised encampments and the criminalisation of trespass⁶. This could make trespass and unauthorised encampments a crime resulting in prison, a fine or a family's home being taken from them.

Once the consultation had closed, we wrote to all police forces and police and crime commissioners in England and Wales, as well as the National Police Chief Council and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners to enquire about their responses to the consultation⁷. We found that only 21.7% police respondents agreed with the Home Office proposals to criminalise unauthorised encampments and that 93.7% of police bodies called for site provision as the solution to unauthorised encampments.

Methodology

To illustrate the severe shortage of pitches available to people living on unauthorised encampments, on 26th October 2020, we wrote to all Local Authorities and Private Registered Providers in England to enquire about pitch availability and waiting list length on their sites⁸. This represented 266 Traveller sites with a total of 4503 permanent pitches and 354 transit pitches.

Of these, we received responses for 251 Traveller sites representing 3482 permanent pitches and 304 transit pitches. Please note that upon contacting organisations managing Traveller sites, we were notified that in a number of places a site had been missed by the Government caravan count and therefore we updated the number of sites included in our research accordingly. In addition, we were informed on five occasions that a Traveller site had now closed and on five occasions we were

⁵ <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Briefing-Accommodation-issues-facing-Gypsies-and-Travellers-in-England.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/strengthening-police-powers-to-tackle-unauthorised-encampments>

⁷ <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Full-Report-Police-repeat-calls-for-more-sites-not-powers-FINAL.pdf>

⁸ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2020) Count of Traveller caravans: live tables. Live Table 2. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/traveller-caravan-count-january-2020>

informed that a site was owned by a private individual and were unable to obtain the relevant contact details to ascertain number of available pitches.

Despite numerous emails and phone calls over a six-week period, site managers for 28 sites which represented 463 permanent pitches and 69 transit pitches never responded. We assume that if a member of the public was to contact these organisations in the same way e.g. through multiple phone calls and emails on multiple days that they would also not receive a response. Therefore, we feel it is unlikely that any available pitches on these sites would actually be accessible to members of the general public. We consider it likely that if there were available pitches on these sites, organisations would have wanted to highlight this because of commercial opportunity involved in payment for filled pitches.

Key findings

As mentioned on page one, we found that at the time of our research there were:

- Only 13 permanent sites and five transit sites with any available pitches for Gypsy and Traveller families in all of England.
- Only 59 available permanent pitches in total for Travellers in all of England.
- Only 42 available transit pitches in total for Travellers in all of England.
- At least 1696 households on waiting lists for pitches on Traveller sites in England.

Of the 59 permanent pitches noted as available in the figures above, 13 of those pitches are located on Crompton Lodge Caravan Site, however, newspaper reports feature an interview from a man called Thomas who lives on a roadside camp in the area and says *“it’s so run down half of it is not fit to use. The tiling on the roof, the cladding, the drains and the sinks are broken. It’s in a terrible state”*⁹. In the article Thomas highlights that if there was a better facility available, or people in his group were able to buy land from the council, the group would not continue to move from roadside camp to roadside camp. Given the nationwide demand for available pitches, it is likely that many of the 59 pitches have not been filled for similar reasons.

Of the 42 transit pitches noted as available in the figures above, at least 20 of those pitches have no electricity source. For 32 of the 42 transit pitches noted as available in the figures above, representatives from the local council have made public statements which indicate that the main justification for the existence of the sites is so that police can use eviction powers under Section 62 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act which are only possible in areas with transit sites¹⁰. In North Norfolk District Council, Richard Price, cabinet member responsible for assets said *“This also serves to look after the prettiest parts of the district”*, insultingly implying that Gypsy and Traveller people were a threat to the beauty of areas of Norfolk¹¹. In addition, it is important to note that on the majority of transit pitches, families are only permitted to stay for only a few weeks and then are not allowed to return for a number of months so it is unsurprising that some pitches were available, especially during cold weather and as a result of the public health measures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic which restrict travelling.

In response to our question about waiting lists, a number of councils advised that they were unable to provide this information because of data protection laws and a number of councils did not respond, which means that the figures are likely to be much higher. In a number of cases, councils

⁹ <https://www.theboltonnews.co.uk/news/15452841.travellers-in-oakenbottom-road-breightmet-claim-official-crompton-lodge-caravan-park-is-horrible/>

¹⁰ <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/first-look-birmingham-car-park-17135241>

¹¹ <https://www.northnorfolknews.co.uk/news/traveller-sites-to-be-renewed-1623224>

provided additional information on their waiting lists and amenities on pitches which paints a depressing picture of future availability of pitches for families living roadside. In Surrey, where there are 150 households on waiting lists for pitches, we heard, *“Our current sites are all doubled up and there is overcrowding.”* In other areas, we heard:

“Our permanent sites have a waiting list of over 20 families and with around 10 changes of tenants in the last ten years, without new development this list is likely to grow rather than reduce.”

“Our transit site has been operating at only half capacity since July 2020. We have currently 5 families on our transit site and we are not accepting any more families after tomorrow due to government lockdown measures. Our permanent site is full with 23 families on our waiting list. We have been unable to offer any places since the site opened in 2016.”

“We currently have no pitches available on any of our 10 sites (206 pitches). [...] We also have in excess of 100 persons on our waiting list for a pitch, mostly with good Hertfordshire connections.”

“[Site one] is a site with one pitch only and the same family has occupied it for well over 50 years, [Site two] has 20 double pitches again all full with a low turnover (less than 1 pitch per year) we have a waiting list of over 30 families currently.”

“[There has been] only one new tenant across all sites in the last 18 months.”

“This is an emergency facility on uneven land liable to partial flooding in bad weather, with water and toilets but no electric and only suitable in extreme cases, short term.”

Recommendations

- The Government should change their approach to unauthorised encampments from enforcement, to an approach which prioritises provision of sites and negotiated stopping arrangements.
- The Government should abolish proposals to criminalise trespass and quash plans to strengthen police powers to evict.
- The Government should reintroduce pitch targets and a statutory duty onto local authorities to meet the assessed need for Gypsy and Traveller sites.
- The Government should adopt a definition of a Traveller in planning terms that incorporates all Gypsies and Travellers who need a pitch to live on.
- The Government should ring-fence funding for local authorities to build Gypsy and Traveller sites.

About us

Friends, Families and Travellers is a leading national charity that works on behalf of all Gypsies, Roma and Travellers regardless of ethnicity, culture or background.

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