

Gypsies and Travellers: Site Provision and their Migratory Pattern
(Extract from the Guidance on Managing Unauthorised Camping issued by the
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister)

Introduction

Gypsies and Travellers make up a small minority within the wider population. Some live in caravans or other vehicles and follow a lifestyle, which is nomadic or semi-nomadic, in that it involves travel during at least part of the year.

At present there are more Gypsy/Traveller caravans in circulation than there are 'authorised' legal places for them to stop. At any one time there are around 3,500 Gypsy/Traveller caravans on unauthorised sites in England. Hardly any of these could be accommodated on existing authorised sites specifically provided for Gypsies and Travellers.

Unauthorised encampments vary enormously

- in size : from a couple of vehicles to groups with over 100 caravans
- in location: from the hidden away and unobtrusive to neighbours, to the highly visible and intrusive
- in behaviour of unauthorised campers : from those where no-one on the encampment causes any nuisance to others, to those where many cause nuisance
- in impact on the land: from groups who leave a camping area tidier than they found it, to those who leave the land damaged and with mountains of fly-tipped trade waste and domestic refuse

Numbers and Scale

Local authorities carry out the twice-yearly Gypsy caravan count for the Office of Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). It gives an indication of the numbers of Gypsy caravans on authorised (public and private) and unauthorised sites on set dates in January and July. They provide local authorities with useful information about the accommodation needs of Gypsies who reside in or resort to their areas on the count dates. They also provide authorities; the Planning Inspectorate and the Secretary of State with some of the background information required when planning matters (development plans, planning applications, appeals and enforcement actions) are being considered.

The count has been carried out for over twenty years. Over this period the total number of Gypsy caravans has increased by some 70% while the number on unauthorised sites has decreased thanks to the growth of private and public authorised site provision as well as movement of Gypsies and Travellers into housing.

In July 2003, about 14,700 Gypsy caravans were counted, of which 3,979 were on unauthorised sites. This latter figure can be split between 2,315 caravans on unauthorised encampments and 1,664 on Gypsy-owned land, which are likely to represent unauthorised developments. Over the past few years, on average, there have been about 800 more Gypsy caravans on unauthorised sites across England in July than in January, reflecting a seasonal element in travelling patterns.

Geographically, the counts consistently show highest numbers of Gypsy caravans on unauthorised sites in Eastern, Southeast and Southwest regions. Very generally, the patterns reflect traditional areas of resort for Gypsies and Travellers and, importantly, work opportunities.

There are three main Gypsy/Traveller groupings in England:

Traditional English (Romany) Gypsies

Traditional Irish Travellers

New Age Travellers.

The first two groupings are accepted as ethnic minorities for the purposes of race relations legislation. The different groupings have different economic, social, cultural and lifestyle characteristics. While there are many examples of peaceful co-existence of Gypsy/Traveller groups, mixing can sometimes lead to friction.

Recent Research

Research undertaken for ODPM on the provision and condition of local authority Gypsy/Traveller sites in England made the following points.

There is some evidence of a trend towards greater 'settlement' among some Gypsy/Traveller groups. However, other individuals and families have no desire to 'settle' and will continue to travel actively.

In order to accommodate the desire for nomadism, between 2,000 and 2,500 additional authorised transit/mobility pitches were estimated to be needed before 2007. At present there are only about 500 transit pitches provided on authorised local authority and private sites.

The research also estimated a requirement for up to 2,500 further pitches on residential sites for Gypsies and Travellers, which could be provided either by local authorities or Gypsies and Travellers themselves.

Gypsies and Travellers, police and local authority personnel acknowledged to the researchers the existence of a minority of 'problem families' among the Travelling community who are associated with criminal and anti-social behaviour. 'Problem families' cause problems for the majority law-abiding Gypsies and Travellers who also fear that this very visible minority disproportionately affects settled community images and stereotypes of the Travelling community as a whole.

While unauthorised camping is much more significant in some areas, almost any local authority is at risk of encampment and should be prepared to deal with encampment.

Unauthorised encampments vary widely. Local authorities, police and others dealing with unauthorised camping therefore need to be prepared to react to individual circumstances.

Getting to know local travelling patterns and groups is critical to building a sound strategy. Getting to know individuals and building trust at a personal level with regular Gypsy and Traveller visitors can prevent problems developing.

The nature of travelling and unauthorised encampment means it cannot be sensibly seen as a purely local phenomenon. An eviction in one area may have the effect of merely pushing the encampment over a local boundary for another authority to deal with. Local authorities and police forces should work together across boundaries to assess needs and determine strategies in response to unauthorised camping over the wider area. At a minimum, authorities should work together at county level, ideally at regional or sub-regional level.

Good preparation and planning can minimise the disruption of unauthorised encampments. For this, sound intelligence and good networking is essential between local authorities and police forces in an area to keep everyone informed of Gypsy/Traveller groups and their movements. At the least, neighbouring authorities and other agencies that offer services for Gypsies and Travellers should always be informed when a large encampment is to be evicted.