

12 April 2018 by David Dewar ,

## **A government consultation on Gypsies and travellers is too focused on stronger enforcement at the expense of boosting site supply, according to practitioners.**



*Traveller sites: consultation launched on ways to improve enforcement against illegal sites*

The continuing existence of a "significant number" of unauthorised Gypsy and traveller encampments in England, accounting for 16 per cent of all caravans last July, is highlighted in a Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government consultation document published this month, *Powers for dealing with unauthorised development and encampments*. The document poses a number of questions about the enforcement tools available to local authorities and whether these could be strengthened.

But practitioners and campaigners have criticised the government's approach for its focus on enforcement rather than site provision. "I'm really disappointed with the consultation," said Catriona Riddell, strategic planning convenor for the Planning Officers Society. "Planning minister Dominic Raab made the point that local authorities have got to do their bit as well, but I was expecting more on that side of things."

"My first reaction when I read the consultation was that this is exactly where we were in 2005 and, frankly, not a lot has changed," said Richard Bennett, chair of the board of trustees for support group London Gypsies and Travellers. "I suspect that all that will happen is that we will have another summer where people are being evicted from somewhere with no thought as to where they are to go."

The government's Planning Policy for Traveller Sites (PPTS) requires councils to understand the accommodation needs of their travelling communities and to set pitch and plot targets in their plans accordingly. Riddell says councils have made progress in recent years in assessing their traveller accommodation needs. But actual site provision is proving more challenging, with three separate studies conducted by Gypsy and traveller groups in 2016 finding that most authorities were failing to meet the PPTS requirement to provide a five-year supply of new pitches.

National charity Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT) reported that in the South East, only ten local authorities out of 66 had identified a five-year supply of sites. The National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups found that, out of 70 local planning authorities in the East and West Midlands, only 15 had identified a five-year supply.

Finally, the London Gypsy and Traveller Unit calculated that since 2012, only half of London boroughs had set a pitch target and just five had gone on to identify a supply of land to meet the target.

According to Michelle Gavin, projects manager at FFT, travellers located on unauthorised pitches are there "because there is a chronic national shortage of sites". She said: "Local authorities are responsible for identifying land for Gypsy and traveller communities to live on, but the vast majority of local authorities are completely failing to fulfil this duty."

Riddell agreed that most local authorities are "still really struggling" to find deliverable sites to meet their local target. "We were hoping that the government would do something about that, but it doesn't sound as though it is doing anything other than making it harder for travellers to stay where they are," she said. Much traveller need is in the countryside around urban areas, Riddell said, which can make delivery difficult due to green belt issues. In addition, many councils focus on creating extra provision on existing sites, which risks overcrowding, she adds.

Steve Jarman, senior research executive at consultancy ORS, which specialises in traveller need assessments, said the need identified in local plans has dropped by about 70 to 80 per cent since the government changed the definition of "travellers" for planning purposes in 2015. "[Real] levels of need are increasing year on year because the population is increasing, but the [recorded] need is being artificially decreased by the changes to the planning definition," he said. Jarman said the government consultation's focus on enforcement is likely to make the situation "an awful lot worse".

"Councils are not providing sites, whether it's because they don't want to or whether they find it difficult politically," he concluded.

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