

Housing Strategy and Development Briefing Note 15/1

The Equality and Human Rights Commission's Report
'Developing Successful Site Provision for Scotland's Gypsy/
Traveller Communities'
January 2015



Introduction

Welcome to a series of regular briefings prepared by the Housing Strategy and Development team on the big issues concerning housing. These briefings will be shared with staff, tenants and elected members and keep everyone up to date with regards the ever changing policy context that we are operating within.

The Housing Strategy and Development section is responsible for:-

- Providing the statutory strategic housing authority role within the local authority area
- Supporting the development of a culture of continuous improvement in Housing services and to facilitate opportunities to excel;
- Developing and implementing effective strategies for Housing and Community Safety Services within West Dunbartonshire;
- Developing the Council's housing strategy to ensure that it supports the delivery of our strategic priorities;
- Service development within Housing and Community Safety services; and
- Promoting effective management and the involvement of tenants across all aspects of Housing Services.

For further information on Housing Strategy and Development please telephone 01389 737889 or e-mail: housing.strategy@west-dunbarton.gov.uk

Briefing Note

The Equality and Human Rights Commission's Report

'Developing Successful Site Provision for Scotland's Gypsy/ Traveller Communities'

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Introduction:

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has published a research report entitled 'Developing Successful Site Provision for Scotland's Gypsy/ Traveller Communities'¹ on how local authorities have successfully developed and maintained Gypsy and Traveller sites in Scotland. The research was commissioned in direct response to claims from some Scottish local authorities that they were unable to secure land or planning permission to build new permanent or transit sites.

Background:

The development of authorised sites is seen as a major strategy for addressing some of the long-standing inequalities facing gypsy/traveller communities and in particular in overcoming the tensions between these communities and the settled population.

While some local authorities have been proactive in working to address the shortfall of accommodation for Gypsy/Traveller communities, much more needs to be done. An often cited barrier to progressing with site development is the negative impact the establishment of sites has on social relations in a local area or neighbourhood. However, such barriers are not fixed and permanent: experiences in a number of local areas have illustrated what can be achieved by changing how the issue is approached.

The aim of the report is to illustrate the factors which contribute to the establishment and maintenance of good community relations when proposing and developing

¹ Developing Successful Site Provision for Scotland's Gypsy/ Traveller Communities – A report for the Equality and Human Rights Commission Philip Brown Sustainable Housing and Urban Studies Unit Salford University January 2015

Gypsy/Traveller sites. It draws on examples of good practice which can be adapted for different localities.

Key Points:

The report highlights the following areas:

- **Policy context:** The report outlines the equality obligations towards Gypsy/Travellers. In particular it details the Public Sector Equality Duty as created by the Equality Act 2010. It summarises the duties thus:
 - To eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation
 - To advance equality of opportunity between different groups
 - To foster good relations between different groups.The study goes on to note subsequent SG Equal Opportunities Committee (EOC) enquiries in 2012 and 2013 into care and accommodation respectively.
- **The shortfall in accommodation:** The study notes that the bi-annual caravan count which was introduced in 1998 was discontinued in 2009 when it found there were:
 - 31 socially rented sites across 23 different council areas in Scotland - 28 of these sites operated all year round and three only opened in the summer. Together these sites provided a total of 478 pitches
 - 22 private sites, 17 of which operated all year round and five of which were seasonal, open only in the summer months. It was thought that 161 households were living on private sites.

The number of pitches available to Scottish Gypsy/Travellers fell between 2006 and 2009.

- **Barriers to site development:** Scottish Councils' requirement to consider the accommodation needs of Gypsy /Traveller populations through the Local Housing Strategy process is noted. The report quotes other research which shows that while a number of local authorities had been considering provision of additional pitches, few were carrying through with development. The reasons cited for lack of progress were the presence of vacant pitches, difficulties in finding a suitable site and a lack of funding.

A significant number of reasons for non-progression revolved around the perceived complexity of the issue from local authorities, resistance by local communities (and elected members) and lack of engagement by members of Gypsy/ Traveller communities.

- **Case Studies :** The report details four case studies covering a spectrum of examples:
 - New private site development :Falkirk

- Socially rented site refurbishment: Perth & Kinross
- Management of unauthorised encampments: South Ayrshire
- New socially rented site development: Carlisle.

The report concludes with a *Summary and observations* section. The key summary points are:

- Communication and dialogue: the need for early, inclusive and effective communication is highlighted in all the case studies.
- Location of site provision: in all studies, the importance of getting the right location was implicit. For those studies where new sites were being created, it was a cornerstone of their success. It was a significant benefit if a site already had planning permission as this avoided time consuming opposition.
- Partnership working: the advantage of partnership working, perhaps with neighbouring local authorities, was noted. Evidence from England suggested that energy was often wasted establishing responsibilities between local authorities rather than *how* the accommodation needs can be met.
- Development of a strategy: all but one of the studies was guided by a specific and positive Gypsy/Traveller strategy.
- Understanding need and allocating funding: site provision is unlikely to increase until two key issues are resolved. Firstly, local authority uncertainty over whether they should be developing accommodation, and to what extent; and secondly, funding remains a significant barrier with wider budget pressures meaning that authorities are not incentivised to fund provision.

The author offers some observations around the actions he feels should be prioritised. These include a training programme aimed at key local authority officers across Scotland; training for elected members on tackling inclusion of Gypsy/Traveller communities; the need to ensure there is the transfer of knowledge within and between organisations to allow learning and ensure a consistency of approach; site visits by members of the Planning Committee should be part of every consideration; work should be done on helping community based organisations and bodies such as Community Councils to help foster good relations between communities; more work should be done on understanding the day to day interactions between Gypsy/Traveller communities and the settled population at neighbourhood level.

Issues for West Dunbartonshire

- The report is a valuable addition to the information available on the provision of accommodation for Gypsy /Traveller communities and the good practice examples contained in the case studies will be of particular interest.

- WDC is in the process of transferring the Council owned site from the General Account to the Housing Revenue Account to facilitate site refurbishment. The examples of good practice contained in the report may assist in taking forward this project.
- This report has been circulated around all local authorities by the Scottish Government's Centre for Housing Market Analysis. Together with the increased emphasis on provision for Gypsy/Travellers in the most recent Local Housing Strategy guidance², this highlights the increased importance being placed on the issue by the Scottish Government.



For further information contact:

Jamie Dockery, Housing Strategy Officer 01389 737366

jamie.dockery@west-dunbarton.gov.uk

² Local Housing Strategy Guidance 2014 Scottish Government August 2014
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0045/00458185.pdf>