

Gypsies and Travellers Sites

Frequently Asked Questions

Who are Gypsies and Travellers?

Gypsies and Travellers are defined by Government Circular 01/2006 as 'persons of nomadic habit of life whatever their race or origin'. This includes Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers, but also any other groups who have a nomadic way of life, irrespective of race or origin.

Gypsies and Travellers have been living in England for hundreds of years. The number living in Dorset is estimated at between 2,400 and 3,000 people. There are seasonal differences, with more Travellers arriving during the summer months. Many Gypsies and Travellers move around the country and need temporary transit sites. However, travelling communities are becoming increasingly settled and need permanent residential sites which also act as a base from which to travel.

Who are Travelling Showpeople?

Travelling Showpeople are defined by Government Circular 04/2007 as 'members of a group organised for the purposes of holding fairs, circuses or shows'.

Although their work is of a mobile nature, Showpeople nevertheless require secure, permanent bases for the storage of their equipment and more particularly for residential purposes.

Many Showpeople are members of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain and are required by the Guild to follow a strict code of practice regulating the use of their sites. Membership of the Guild provides Showpeople with exemption from the site licensing requirements of the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960 when they are travelling for the purpose of their business, or where they only occupy quarters for some period between the beginning of October and the end of March in the following year.

In recent years many Showpeople have had to leave traditional sites, which have been displaced by other forms of development. Government circular 04/2007 'Planning for Travelling Showpeople' highlights the need for sites as the community becomes more settled.

Why are more authorised Gypsy and Traveller caravan pitches needed?

There are not enough authorised pitches available to cater for the current and projected future needs of the travelling communities.

This can lead to unauthorised encampments where land is used by Gypsies and Travellers and Travelling Showpeople without the permission of the owner. It also causes unauthorised development, which is where land is owned by Gypsies and Travellers or Travelling Showpeople but does not have planning permission by the local authority. A recent high-profile example has been Dale Farm in Essex.

Why do councils have to identify places for Gypsies and Travellers and Travelling Showpeople to stay?

The Housing Act 2004 requires all councils to assess the accommodation needs of Gypsies and Travellers and Travelling Showpeople. Government Circulars 01/2006 and 04/2007 set out a planning process that councils should follow when identifying appropriate sites to meet Travellers' needs.

Dorset councils conducted a Dorset Traveller Needs Assessment in 2007, which showed the county as a whole needs additional pitches from 2011 to 2026. The councils must now identify potential sites to meet the identified needs.

More generally, the councils have a duty to promote good race relations, equality of opportunity and community cohesion. Helping to identify opportunities for Travellers to buy or rent a culturally appropriate home will help fulfil this duty.

How will the councils provide the pitches that are needed?

All the councils in Dorset have joined together with planning consultants Baker Associates to produce a Gypsy and Traveller and Travelling Showpeople Development Plan Document (DPD).

This is a planning document that will allocate suitable sites for Gypsies and Travellers and Travelling Showpeople to stay on. For two to three years starting in June 2010, the councils and Baker Associates will consult with local organisations and the travelling and settled communities to work towards identifying a range of sites to meet the needs.

How will the sites work once they are identified?

Gypsy and Traveller and Travelling Showpeople sites can be owned and managed by local councils or by the private sector. The preference among the travelling communities is for sites to be privately owned or managed.

Therefore, the DPD will identify sites that Gypsies and Travellers or Travelling Showpeople can buy or rent and expect to receive planning permission.

What are the different types of site needed?

There are three main types of sites: transit sites, residential or 'permanent' sites and Travelling Showpeople sites.

Transit sites

Transit sites are authorised sites that are used for short stays by Gypsies and Travellers. The sites are provided on a permanent basis by local authorities and have basic amenities and services, which include water supply, shared toilets, washing facilities/utility room and waste disposal. They may be used for days or weeks, up to a maximum of three months. Gypsies and Travellers have to pay for a pitch on a transit site.

Residential sites or 'permanent sites'

Residential sites or 'permanent sites' are either provided by local authorities or are owned by Gypsies and Travellers themselves. The sites are used as long-term residences. Sites often contain a number of separate pitches, occupied by each Gypsy or Traveller household, although single pitch sites are also common. Council-owned residential sites are managed by either the local authority or a local housing partner and have a number of amenities, including water supply, electricity, individual toilets and utility rooms.

Travelling Showpeople sites

Travelling Showpeople sites often need to combine residential, storage and maintenance uses. Typically a site comprises areas set aside for the Showpeople's accommodation - usually caravans and mobile homes - and areas where vehicles and fairground equipment can be stored, repaired and occasionally tested. Many Showpeople's sites are run on a private rental basis with one Showperson acting as landlord to their fellow Showpeople. Alternatively, land is bought and subdivided into half acre 'plots' or 'yards', which are then sold on to other Showpeople.

Why do Gypsies and Travellers and Travelling Showpeople need permanent sites anyway?

Over the centuries, more and more traditional stopping places have been closed up or sold for development. These days, it is extremely difficult for families to live on the road as they used to. Cold calling and traditional work is harder and harder to come by and education is becoming increasingly critical.

A more settled existence can prove beneficial to some Gypsies and Travellers and Travelling Showpeople in terms of access to health and education services and employment and can contribute to greater integration and social inclusion within local communities.

Nevertheless, the ability to travel remains an important part of Gypsy and Traveller and Travelling Showpeople culture. Some communities live in extended family groups and often travel as such. This is a key feature of their traditional way of life that has an impact on planning for their accommodation needs.

How will the Development Plan Document (DPD) decide whether a site is suitable or not?

Suitable sites will need to comply with national and local planning policies, other regulations and meet the accommodation needs of the travelling communities.

As part of the preparation of this DPD, the councils and their consultants will consult with a range of people and organisations to identify a list of Dorset-specific criteria, which will be used to assess whether potential sites are suitable.

How will the Development Plan Document (DPD) benefit local communities?

The key to reducing unauthorised encampments and developments is to provide authorised sites. Unauthorised sites cause community tension. Identifying suitable authorised sites should reduce unauthorised camping and enable the police and planning authorities to deal swiftly with any unauthorised encampments or developments that do occur.

Providing the right number of pitches makes good financial sense for councils. Bristol City Council, for example, saw enforcement costs drop from £200,000 a year to just £5,000 a year after they built a site. Now they spend the money they used to spend on moving people along for local initiatives and projects, benefiting local communities.

Will local communities end up paying for this?

Many of the sites identified through the DPD will be purchased and financed or privately rented by Gypsies, Travellers or Travelling Showpeople in the same way as individual housebuyers or rentpayers, at no cost to local communities.

In terms of new public sites, a number of funding options are available, including funding by Gypsies and Travellers themselves and the use of Government grants, which local authorities and registered social landlords (housing associations) can bid for, for the provision of Gypsy and Traveller pitches. This Gypsy and Traveller Site Grant is available for the provision of new sites or the refurbishment of existing pitches.