

Local Government and Housing Committee: Inquiry into the provision of sites for Gypsy, Roma and Travellers

FOCUS GROUP NOTES

29TH MAY 2022

INTRODUCTION

As part of the ongoing Senedd Inquiry into provision of sites for Gypsies and Travellers, Gypsies and Travellers Wales and Travelling Ahead co-facilitated an on-line focus group for members of the community to participate in and share their experiences. The questions were formulated to better understand the issues that members of the different communities have had when trying to engage with local authorities and the planning process. Questions were also asked around the GTAA's and how effective community members feel they are.

With the introduction of the new PCSC Act, which comes into force from the 28th June, participants were also asked about their concerns for the future and how the new law will affect their communities across Wales.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of eight people took part in the focus group. Of these, five were from the Romany Gypsy community, two were from the New Traveller community and one person did not identify themselves. The participants either lived or had lived in various locations around Wales and several had direct experience of the planning process and engagement with local authorities.

Participants were given a £20 shopping voucher in recognition of the time they gave to take part in this session.

THE DISCUSSION

The questions and answers from the discussion with main points of interest and quotes from participants are listed here in detail.

Why are you here today? What is your interest/concern?

People talked about their communities and how they were concerned about lack of sites and had been feeling frustrated for many years.

"We like to travel in summer, to shows, like the Royal Welsh, and Appleby or Stow Fair, but we need a place to stop. We can't travel all the time but travelling is what we do; what we have always done! It's been getting harder and harder but now I am frightened that the new law is going to stop us totally."

Others talked about how they feel their community has been discriminated against and how they feel worried for the future. How people they know have tried to get through the planning process and

have bought land to provide their own sites, but still come up against discrimination and end up feeling exhausted and beaten by the system they are up against.

One person described how the media portray achievements by Gypsies and Travellers in sport if they win medals or contests and how then;

"everyone loves us. If Tyson Fury wins a fight he's the Gypsy King and everyone thinks he's amazing. My ancestors fought in the wars for their country, this country, but when its about us travelling or asking for planning permission for sites, nobody wants to know. We give medals and trophies and fight in wars for everyone but then get treated like second class citizens."

"Why not stop others from pulling up and travelling in motor homes.....why us? If it was us the police and council will come down!"

Where do you live and where have you lived previously?

Five people said they were living in bricks and mortar currently, although several of them have at various points in the past also lived either on an official site or roadside (so called unauthorised encampments). One person stated they were living in a 'truck' on a site but did not give any further information. One of the New Travellers told us,

"It's a waste of resources for people to be in bricks and mortar when I really just want to be in a truck tucked away somewhere."

Participants lived in locations such as Pembrokeshire, Newport, Cardiff, Powys. Most of those in bricks and mortar were renting but one person owned their house.

"I've never lived on site but stayed on site with family years ago when we visited. We used to stay on car parks and laybys or on temporary sites."

"I live in bricks and mortar, not through choice, but through circumstances outside of my control, because my mother was non-consensually removed into care and that meant bricks and mortar. This is essentially forced assimilation, which impacts on subsequent generations. My mother's words captured in this GRTHM blog."

<https://www.basw.co.uk/media/news/2022/jun/basw-blog-reflections-whatmakesahome>

Did you take part in the GTAA in 2021 or in 2015? Do you feel it makes any difference and have you seen any new sites being developed as a result of GTAAAs?

One person said they always made sure they filled in for her and her family as a matter of principle, but that they are still in the same place and she has seen no changes. Her family needed help as they are not able to read and write and don't like filling in forms.

"I encourage everyone to fill them in. Since I was at school I've tried to use my education to help my community. But it wasn't explained very well. For example, the transit site explanation was not clear so people thought Councils might build transit sites right next to or on their sites so folk said they did not want them. But they do. People need transit sites, or stopping places, but just not built on an existing site as it causes issues and upset to those families living there for ages."

One person had not done any GTAAAs as she was a New Traveller and living in bricks and mortar.

"I think also that lots of New Travellers don't often want to come forward. We are the hidden Travellers and some don't want to be counted as they are on unofficial and hidden sites and are scared of losing them. Also a local councillor told me New Travellers don't count anyway."

There was a general concern that many people are being missed out from being invited to take part in GTAAAs. It was felt that local authorities need to improve engagement and set aside proper funding for Gypsy Traveller organisations to be able to support them with community engagement. One participant who had previously worked as a community advocate told us,

"I didn't get asked to do a GTAA as I was in a house but then I got involved in the steering group and mentioned what my kids might want in the future. I've done the last 3 now but people in houses get missed. I pointed that out to the council."

Some people said they had done it but felt it was pointless. One person said she had never been asked and felt she was not treated as G&T just because she lives in a house and not on a site. One person said they were aware of one site that had been granted planning permission as a result of findings from a past GTAA.

"The only positive change I know about was when they built a new site in Powys and refurbished the one in Welshpool but I've not seen any change other than that."

Another told us,

"They built a new site at Kilgetty after the 2015 GTAA. But it was just ten pitches added on to existing site so it was just taking up overcrowding on that site that was already there."

"I didn't take part in this GTAA because like other Gypsies and Travellers who live in bricks and mortar, through choice or coercion, we are not made to believe that the GTAA is for us. The councils don't even believe we have needs related to our ethnicity and nomadism, it's not on their radar, so doesn't exist as a potential."

Do you think there are enough permanent sites for your community in your area?

The resounding answer was no. People felt that local authorities are years behind providing and that the need has far outgrown what has been built.

"We are always told we have to wait for a budget or the next plan. What sites there are, are substandard, in places where settled folk would never want to live, or the pitches are small and nothing is built properly."

"I know of one private site for New Travellers and that family had to fight for years and threaten the council with Children's Act. Even then they only got temporary planning. They had to prove their Traveller status and gather evidence for an inquiry. It took years and was really exhausting and expensive."

"We buy our own land but we still have to battle for planning?! I know a family with a piece of land but they can't get planning permission as its floodplain. But I have seen new housing built on floodplain! Why don't we get permission if they do? If the laws are going to stop us from travelling we need more sites! Or where do we go?"

"Sites are growing but not being expanded to meet the needs of the community. People are all squashed on the site and what about the waiting list? People are forced into bricks and mortar but they don't want to be in a house. We are lucky and we have expanded our house to make it bigger for our kids."

"I live in Swansea and the local authority has a poor record of assessing and meeting the needs of ethnic Gypsies and Travellers, New Travellers or those who travel for employment."

Do you think there is a need for transit sites or other temporary sites/stopping places in your area? What do you think would work best?

This raised some interesting discussion and comes back to how the question around provision of transit sites was dealt with in the GTAA questions. It was felt that temporary stopping places are needed but that transit sites do not always meet the needs of the community. For example, if people travelling through an area on their way to a show just need one night to stop and have access to some basic facilities, a transit site would not be appropriate.

Also the siting of transit sites causes issues. It was felt that local authorities do not understand these issues fully. A good analogy of the conflict transit sites can cause was that it would be like a small village community where people had lived for years suddenly having a very large new housing estate built on the outskirts, or if someone in a sleepy community buys a large property and turns it into an Air BnB 'party house'. People feel threatened and worried by the change and have no control over who stays there.

"Transit sites can cause issues between families and nobody wants to manage those conflicts. I worked on a transit site and could see there was an issue with the families and there was a fight. In the end I had to break it up. Transit sites are badly managedI think stopping places would be better than transit provision."

"I worked in an area in England where a transit site was put right at the front of a permanent site. It was a disaster! The housing association who ran the site didn't manage the transit site at all. The families who lived on the permanent site were threatened and bullied by some people who turned up on the transit site once or twice and the answer the housing association had was to put in a massive sliding gate and big fence with a code on the gate. Then it just made the families feel like they lived in a prison!"

"I think designated stopping places would be better with a mix of transit sites. Stopping places are more flexible and you can call ahead for facilities and would maybe just need to be seasonal. We are happy to pay for facilities!"

"As New Travellers we always tried to find unused council land to stop on when we travelled, but there isn't really anywhere now for bigger groups, only you are in an individual vehicle and even that is harder now."

"There aren't any transit sites or temporary stopping places, which are needed to accommodate a variety of needs, cultural and linked to employment. If transit sites or stopping places are built with real sensitivity to cultural need - in places that were original achin tans/stopping places where that's possible. They need to have appropriate amenities – water, toilets, waste disposal/collection/Wi-Fi."

"Temporary stopping places need to accommodate all of the protected characteristics which can be the some of the reasons why some Gypsies and Travellers end up in bricks and mortar. Lack of disability access is one such example."

"What also needs to happen (the Race Equality Wales Action Plan insists on this) is that the structural and socially acceptable racism directed towards Gypsies and Travellers needs to be tackled directly, because this is at the heart of a lack of accountability linked to GTAA's and their inadequacy."

What do you see as the reason why new sites are not getting built? Do you think the current planning procedures are fair and do you understand the system?

Everyone felt that it is not a fair system and that there was widespread discrimination with regard to who gets planning permission. As previously stated by one participant, it seems that housing estates get through the planning system but sites don't. There were several accounts of people who had bought land then been refused planning permission on grounds of it being flood plain or greenbelt or other protected landscape but then settled people had managed to get permission next door for a house.

People spoke of families they knew who had been trying for years to get permission to site just one or two static caravans.

"It's not anywhere near a fair system. Our communities need support from planning officers and specialists who can help us. The terminology is too much. It needs to be simpler so that people who have low literacy can understand it. The applications need to be simpler. There always seem to be an excuse for not granting site. It's such a long winded process and going to appeal is waste of money and time but our communities don't get the right advice so it just drags on and on."

"Trying to understand the jargon in the planning system is impossible. It's like its designed to put us off. It makes you feel stupid if you ask what something means! On one hand the Welsh Government say they are inclusive but then they put up all these barriers and it's like they say we have to jump through the hoops and they will push you like an army assault course."

"I think the councils feel they do us a favour when giving us planning. When actually it is our right, just like anyone else's."

"New sites are not being built because of a lack of accountability for local authorities who fail to meet assessed need or fail to even identity a need to assess, in some instances. At the heart of this is systemic racism. If this were any other ethnic group, this would not be happening. Until there is a Gypsy or Traveller in a position to ensure that accountability within local government/Welsh Government, nothing will change."

How can the planning procedure for designating and building new sites be made easier and fairer?

Participants felt that local authorities need to simplify the process and speed it up. Suggestions included working with organisations to create easy to read documents and to signpost people to independent agencies and planning specialists who can offer free advice and support from the start. There was also a strong feeling that communities should be involved with local authorities and site provision, beyond simply being asked in GTAAAs.

"It's not that hard. They ask us why do you need a site? We reply for my family. End of."

"The councils should do the impact assessments. Just help us. It costs everyone less in the long run. Use normal language. Help us through the process."

"It would help if something like steering groups were set up to help with planning, but they need to be grassroots community based."

There was a discussion about how there needs to be someone in position who knows the planning system and can advise the community fairly to stop people buying sites they believe they can get planning.

"We waste a lot of money when we should be advised before we buy so we don't waste money because we always get turned down. They won't provide us a council site but we can't get our own sites either!"

"Advocacy for Gypsies and Travellers wanting to apply for planning permission/buy land. Confront systemic racism within the planning system."

What would you consider to be a good design for a site and what are the needs of your community when planners are thinking about how a site should look?

People felt that when local authorities had built sites there was not enough community involvement with how they are designed. Often a lot of money is spent on sites that are actually not what the community need or want and ends up being inappropriate. There was also concern about where sites are built and impact this has on peoples' health long term.

"We all need somewhere to call home. The kids need a site so they can stay at school and so we can access healthcare. We need a place or we will be on the road."

"Sites have to be hidden it seems. We are hidden, behind trees out of sight, or on bits of land nobody else wants to live on. On the edges of places stuck out on our own. Sometimes in unhealthy places."

"Things like even trying to get a postcode or telephone and electricity to a new private site is difficult. Running water too. If councils could help a little bit with a grant for that to help with utilities costs that would really be great."

“Many illegal sites exist because councils fail to provide adequate housing or approve planning applications for legal sites for Gypsies and Travellers. If they gave us official sites it would help with that and everyone would be happier.”

“The placing of Gypsy and Traveller sites is shameful and feeds into ‘othering’ and poor mental and physical health due to poor basic public amenities, being placed in environmentally poor settings (for example Rover Way in Cardiff).”

“Whatever provision is made, it needs to accommodate needs across the age span and the fact that Gypsies and Travellers live with chronic health conditions which force them into bricks and mortar. These needs must be accommodated on site whether permanent transit or temporary. Work with organisations like CADR who have been undertaking research on the built environment. Make the achin tans and permanent sites models of sustainability, with use of environmentally sustainable materials, with good insulation to cut down on environmental harm and energy costs. Room for growing veg, and animals such as horses.”

“Community knows what good looks like and have been asked multiple times, as the Race Equality (Wales) Action Plan states – it is action, not a continuous round of consultation, that is needed.”

Are you worried about the Policing Act? How do you think Section 4 of the new Policing Bill will affect you and your community in your area, and what can the Welsh government and local authorities do to support you in a post Policing Bill Wales?

This question created the longest debate. Everyone is incredibly worried and frightened about the impact the new law will have. Given that there is a huge lack of site provision, and no provision for transit sites or temporary stopping places across Wales, people feel stuck between a rock and a hard place and feel that this is a deliberate policy to force them into bricks and mortar and stamp out their culture and traditions. In the past, there has been some conflict between ethnic and cultural nomadic groups with regard to site provision and the right to identify as a Traveller, but the feeling now is that people from all the different communities need to pull together and support each other. Also that local authorities need to reach out to the communities to create a support network and learn about the impact this law will have. By doing this, positive solutions and more appropriate, quicker site provision can help prevent people being made criminals for no reason other than not having a place to call home and not understanding how the new law works.

“Now we have to take part in what’s going on. We are being forced into a corner and now we have to pull together across the communities and use this as a positive.....we have to find positive solutions from this. Work with local authorities too. They need to reach out to us so we can all work together or it is going to be a mess.”

“When your home is a caravan, this new law cannot be seen as anything else but an attempt to erase us from existence.”

“The New Traveller communities are saying we will fight. Like we did before. There is mix of defiance and fear out there. The horse drawn community are highly visible and concerned about the future and their safety. They are very nomadic. People are preparing as best they can.”

"I have seen video evidence of an eviction already in England, using the new law. Even though they shouldn't till the 28th June. There was no welfare check. It was an instant eviction. It was horrific."

"It's just not been thought through properly. Where are they going to house all these people if they evict them? Children? Women? Split up families? What about the horses and dogs? They haven't realised how much money this will take. Social services, NHS, education, RSPCA. I am so worried because lots of people in my community just don't know or understand about the new law and what it means."

"I think we need to all approach the councils and police and talk to them because some police forces really don't want it. We need to sit down with police forces and discuss how to prevent evictions."

"Site provisions should be made instead just criminalizing people. We have to keep the pressure up. I think many people up high and in local authorities have not had a chance to deal or work out what this new law means. But we can help them! They might want our help because they have had this hoisted on them."

"Are the police really going to do anything? This law is ridiculous. Just leave us alone to get on. It will stop our way of life; our social calendar: our family needs. But look, we are gonna travel because its our tradition! They don't stop other ethnic communities living their traditions. We should be treated the same."

"Let us be traditional. Consider the knock-on effect too. For example, the money we spend in places we visit. At Appleby and the Royal Welsh etc. We pay into the community. The Welsh government should support us! We need more stopping places not transit sites. Come and talk to us and negotiate. We just need basic things like toilets, a safe place. We will pay. We are happy to pay but just ask us."

"We can't go on caravan sites as they won't take us so where do we go? How can they put in an act and then punish us when we got nowhere to go? What if our men are at work? How will it affect the families? They can't move if it's just the women and kids, so where will they go? Help us and we will help you."

"With the Royal Welsh show, our families paid the farmer to stay on the land, then the council rented the field off the farmer then made money out of it. I work there doing security cos I have got my ticket. Okay, sometimes people behave badly but we had bowsers, skips, toilets. And mostly it was good but now where do we go? The council tried to sneak in that they aren't giving us a site but we will still turn up so where do we go for that month? It's one big family there and a big part of our tradition."

"It's like that poem; first they came for the Communists etc. Now they are coming for the Gypsies and who is there to speak for us? We need support. Not punishment."

"Of course, I'm worried, it's an existential threat to our existence and this country should hang its head in shame. Gypsies and Travellers don't self-identify on official census etc because of a lack of faith in anything improving for them and also because being visible is associated with

oppression by the state. The Roma and Sinti Holocaust is in living memory and the Police Act feels like this part of history beginning to repeat itself. Part 4 of the Police Act is racist and aimed as forceable assimilation. Gypsies and Travellers are at risk of becoming criminalised, imprisoned, fined and their homes removed, something that should not be allowed to happen with the legal duties which exist in Wales and the values we hold dear.

Wales will never be an anti-racist nation if the legally protected accommodation needs of Gypsies and Travellers are not made a priority. Let's not forget that Jimmy Carr was allowed to 'perform' in Cardiff St David's Hall because people paid for their tickets and the venue didn't want to face insurance claims, or to be sued by Jimmy Carr. If he had said Jewish people or Black people instead of Gypsies, that 'performance' would have been cancelled. This is at the heart of what needs to be addressed if Gypsies and Travellers are ever to have culturally appropriate accommodation needs met – systemic racism."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants in this group discussion live across different areas of Wales, and are from two very different communities, but it was clear from their comments that all have experienced the same issues and all have the same concerns. There are also real worries about the incoming PCSC Act and how people are going to be criminalised, when all they really need is a place to call home.

Here are the key points and recommendations from this focus group discussion;

- The current system of GTAAAs does not reach enough people, with omissions particularly for those living in bricks and mortar and those from the New Traveller community (now into 3rd or 4th generation)

Recommendation: better engagement with community via Gypsy Traveller support organisations with funded support

- The GTAA seems to be a box ticking exercise. No action seems to come of the results so people feel it is pointless to complete

Recommendation: Ensure there is a proper and accessible procedure to demonstrate how the results of GTAAAs are used to improve site provision and make the process more visible to the community

- There needs to be more permanent sites across Wales and better provision for temporary/transit sites, in more appropriate locations. The current planning process presents a huge barrier to the provision of sites, for both local authority provision and private community owned sites and needs to be reviewed

Recommendations: Work with the community to identify their needs and remove barriers such as jargon, technical language, and discrimination from the planning process to speed up and make the process accessible to all.

- Wales must implement its duty of care and support the community through the planning process. There needs to be real community involvement and co-production from the start when looking at future GTAAAs and site provision, as well as continued partnership working with Gypsy Traveller VCSE organisations who are better placed to support community engagement and are aware of the needs of the community

Recommendations: Involve the community from the start and work with them to support planning applications.

- Local authorities and police forces need to work with the communities and Gypsy Traveller organisations to ensure people are supported when the new law comes into force, rather than persecuted.

Recommendations: Implement collaborative working with specialist organisations and improve engagement with the community.

CONCLUSION

The month of June is marked by the travelling community as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month. Four weeks when the vibrancy, talent and heritage of the communities is celebrated. It is also the month of Appleby Horse Fair, the biggest gathering of Romany Gypsies in their calendar year. The Fair is centuries old and is a traditional meeting place for the community to get together, buy and sell ponies, catch up with family members, meet future wives and husbands, and show off their bowtop wagons and trailers.

With the incoming new legislation, it feels like the entire culture of Gypsies and Travellers is in danger of being stamped out. Now more than ever, the community needs support to access better and more sites. Persecution and criminalisation of people who simply just want a place to call home is unjust, discriminatory and racist. No other ethnic minority is treated so poorly, and such discrimination is not tolerated for other groups, yet the Gypsy and Traveller communities still suffer and the imbalance must be redressed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We would like to thank the members of the community who gave their time to participate in this group discussion.