

TRAVELLERS – NEEDS ASSESSMENT INFORMATION

Summary of needs assessment: No needs have yet been identified for this group – housing services contracting of a housing management service with experience and expertise in supporting travelling communities is felt by PCC representatives to fulfil need for housing related support. However, full consultation with travellers themselves as soon as this is possible should be a priority.

1. Scale of the issue:

Plymouth has one authorised site with 13 pitches, accommodating about 18 caravans.

(There are estimated to be around 41,000 gypsies and travellers in England)
ODPM Gypsy/Traveller Sites in England July 2003.

In January 2004 the South West had 537 pitches in use – the proportion of the gypsy/traveller population living on authorised sites has increased – in 1979 50% of travellers lived on unauthorised sites, 36% on public sites and 14% on private sites. In 2000 only 19% were on unauthorised sites, 47% on public sites and 34% on private sites.
ODPM figures.

Which may mean around 4,100 in the South West.

The South West had 1,704 gypsy caravans in January 2004.

ODPM Figures (thought to be a conservative estimate – this amount of caravans might represent 5,100 people and there may be a similar number of new age travellers in the SW – Services for Vulnerable Adults in the South West, GOSW, 2004).

There are no official figures for new age travellers.

2. Difficulties travellers/gypsies face in accessing services:

Travellers in Cornwall experienced prejudice from health care staff.

Cornwall Children's Project Health on the Road: Surveys of the experiences of New Age travellers and Healthcare Staff, The Children's Society 2001.

Health care staff thought access and continuity were the main health care issues for travellers.

As above.

Travellers have difficulties accessing services

“There are a lot of mental health problems on the sites. But people do not seek treatment. Travellers accept that some people are different and support them. But people with severe mental health problems end up being sectioned as there is no preventative intervention” Ex-traveller/travellers support worker.

Services for Vulnerable People in the South West, GOSW, 2004.

3. Consultation with stakeholders:

NB It has not been possible to meet with travellers themselves, as preferred, to discuss their needs, due to the current difficult circumstances of this community. Attempts are being made to establish contact in order that this can be achieved.

Stakeholder conversations:

Social Inclusion Unit:

Explained difficulties within gypsy community currently – with the death in the last few days of a member of their community who was acting as liaison between services and the gypsies (Susan). There is currently a lot of anger and bitterness due to the fact that they felt that Susan tried exhaustively to communicate the needs of their community, facing a lot of hostility in the process, and being let down on a number of occasions prior to her death. There is unlikely to be a good working link for some time, though Benji will make contact with Pat Keenan (a retired travellers worker) who may be able to help at some point in the future.

Issues known to staff at the Social Inclusion Unit were:

1. Transient travellers – there are no transient sites in Plymouth. The gypsy community see themselves as being 'different' to the transient travellers (who make a lifestyle choice to travel) – being of Irish origin with a rich cultural inheritance of the travelling lifestyle. Their pitches are permanent – though many work all over the country and they pay rent for use of their site.
2. Access to services – this is a huge issue, with the gypsy community feeling that they have no access to decision making, and their voices are not heard. Since the demise of the Anti Racism Task Force (of which Susan was an active member) they have had no say in decisions that affect them, and feel they have been neglected by services to which they are entitled. Generally, their access to health services is poor – and this is a priority.
3. Current concerns regarding their belief that soil around their site is contaminated. They feel that testing has been superficial, and they want rigorous testing and some idea as to what action will be taken to purify the soil should it be found to be contaminated.
4. Capacity Building work would be necessary, to help the gypsy/travelling community to advocate for themselves in the future.

Plymouth City Council Housing Department:

- Identified two issues: that of the licensed site at Chelsom Meadow, and the issue of illegally encamped travellers.
- Re. settled site at Chelsom Meadow: PCC contract with Westgates, a specialist traveller management company to manage this licensed site. They manage a number of sites nationally, and offer 365 day per year cover with on call available to offer housing management services and to support travellers with tasks such as reading letters etc., filling in forms, accessing services etc. PCC have a duty to offer of care to settled sites such as this, and find that

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contracting to Westgates offers value for money as well as offering support with some expertise (funded through general fund).

- Plymouth City Council secured a Gypsy Refurbishment grant from ODPM approximately 2 years ago (approx £200,000) to provide hard standings and utilities etc. at the Chelsom site.
- Re. illegal camps – a multi agency working group has been established with a protocol to deal with illegal encampments including: completion of a basic needs assessment by housing staff to identify educational, health, welfare issues; assistance to access services where needs are identified, and where travellers themselves agree to this; working closely with Diversity Unit and the Travellers Education Service. Only after this process has been completed will illegal travellers be 'moved on'.
- There is an issue with lack of 'stop over' places in Plymouth (leading to illegal encampments). Within the Planning Department's 'Structure Plan' PCC has a duty to be making plans to make 'Stop over' provision – but these have not yet been established in Plymouth, as there are difficulties in finding patches of 'spare' land.
- A specifically focussed consultation was carried out with the Travelling community by Sandy Teske, Corporate Consultation Officer, during which the gypsies expressed their concern about the capacity of their site – meaning that units were very close together, and reported that racist incidents were minor and infrequent in the main, and reporting was unlikely due to lack of Police responsiveness to such complaints in the past.
- Housing Manager is not aware of any current housing support needs that are not being met – her perspective is that she sees this as being the remit of her housing officers, and the management company contracted to offer such support, but will alert us to any needs on an ongoing basis.

4. Census data 2001 on numbers of travellers in plymouth city council area:

Six lone parent households with 1 dependent child were living in caravans, mobile or temporary accommodation.

5. Local issues regarding travellers:

Councillor Mike Knight, Devon County Council Executive Member for Community Planning, March 11th 2004: Work with the Gypsy and Traveller Working Party: "We need to ...search for suitable land on which to develop transit sites for the gypsy and traveller community (and) ...encourage a socially inclusive approach to the provision of suitable accommodation for both the transit and more settled gypsy and traveller community".

Press release from Janet Kipling, Exeter 383290, March 11, 2004: "The Haldon and Totnes sites have both been used as illegal encampments by travellers. A group of over 30 caravans currently occupies the Haldon site. The two sites were identified by the County Council to begin a long term strategy of responding to the needs of the gypsy and travelling community, and also to allay concerns of the settled community that often arise when illegal encampments occur. This strategy will identify

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emergency stopping places, transit sites for up to three months stay, and permanent situations. One small part of this strategy was an application for a share of £8 million of new Government funding to construct two official transit sites for the county's travelling community. Travellers would have to pay rent to use the sites. It would enable the County Council to construct the new sites at no cost to local Council Tax payers and better manage the demand for stopping places. There are no official transit sites or emergency stopping places currently in Devon. This often results in legal action to close unauthorised sites which is highly disruptive for travelling people and also simply leads to unauthorised encampments somewhere else".

“Research both nationally and in Devon has highlighted serious health and education problems within travelling communities partly due to the decline of traditional stopping places”.