

Travellers and their neighbours

Solutions for living together

The Equality and Human Rights Commission was launched in October 2007

Our role is to:

- Ensure that people are aware of their rights and how to use them
- Work with employers , service providers and organisations to help them develop best practice
- Work with policymakers , lawyers and the government to make sure that social policy and the law promote equality
- And we can use our powers to enforce the laws that are already in place

However the 2010 Equality Act, which received royal assent in April harmonises, strengthens – but above all simplifies 40 years of equality legislation in Britain .

The new legislation brings together 40 years of acts, statutory instruments , codes of practice and EC directives into a single new Act.

The basic mandate of EHRC is to promote and protect equality and human rights, and to foster good relations – not least by leading on the implementation of the new Equality Act.

importantly it recognises that discrimination can be perpetuated by institutions as much as by individual attitudes

The Act stresses the underlying impact of social and economic disadvantage in perpetuating inequality – we still live in a society where a child's postcode at birth is a reasonable predictor of their adult life chances

Bearing the last point in mind , and in relation to our role in promoting good relations , the Commission recognises the crucial importance of the issues affecting Gypsies and Travellers – from the starting point of accommodation ,

but recognising that Travellers suffer some of the worst elements of disadvantage in Britain today.

Life expectancy for Traveller men and women is 10 years lower than the national average - and a Traveller woman is 20 times more likely than the rest of the population to have experienced the death of a child during its infancy.

The Chair of EHRC , Trevor Philips, has referred to Travellers and their general position in society as reflecting the 'last frontier of racism'.

And on the 40th anniversary of Enoch Powell's speech at the Midland Hotel in Birmingham Trevor referred to modern society and multiculturalism in the context of a ' tide of hope ' – the Commission's wish now is that Travellers may catch this tide .

The Commission sees Gypsy and Traveller communities as an integral part of 21st Britain , and some local authorities have committed themselves to meet the needs of these nomadic groups – helping to preserve their traditional lifestyle while giving access to health and education services , and above all maintaining two way good relations with other parts of the community.

In my own part of the world, Fenland in Cambridgeshire, has a small District Council with a sizeable and traditional Traveller population.

Fenland prides itself on good management of the 5 Sites it owns, every resident contractually agrees to standards of social behaviour and rent must be paid on time – in return the Council undertakes to meet high standards in maintenance, rubbish collection and communication with Traveller residents.

An important element of a joint communication policy is that the Council provides advice on making planning applications for privately owned Sites – this kind of engagement means that Travellers will discuss setting up a Site rather than taking the unauthorised route which so often poisons relations between Travellers and other residents in a local context .

The Site policy in Fenland has been an integral element in promoting good relations – everyone in the community knows that there are ground rules ,

and the council's planning advice service is for other Fenland residents as well.

I should also add here that EHRC strongly welcomes the developing involvement of Planning Aid in addressing the needs of Travellers by using accessible and appropriate methods – and visiting people on site.

Overall, the transparency of engagement in Fenland has seen Traveller tensions go way down the agenda – the policy is fair, but also firm.

On the rare occasions that an unauthorised site springs up there will be an attempt to talk things through with all parties - but legal action is a last resort if necessary, although rarely needed.

Most importantly , Fenland have shown strong leadership in relation to this policy - and as the deputy leader says .

'By providing good sites we avoid many of the problems associated with Gypsies and Travellers , which (10 years ago) gave them a bad name and attracted bad publicity. '

The Fenland example shows that common sense and a proportionate policy can work - and while every set of local circumstances are different there will be many such examples to be found – and Fenland is not alone in having such a positive approach (I quote it merely from familiarity with it.)

Generally speaking , those of us in public bodies have arrived in a different political landscape in the course of a few weeks - not least in taking forward any initiative which has the word ' regional' in front of it !

However EHRC is very concerned that the revoking of the Regional Spatial Strategy does not deter all those concerned with the process from dealing with the challenge of providing sufficient authorised Sites .

It is estimated that, nationwide, a total allocation of one square mile of land would provide all the additional legal Site provision that is currently needed .

Ever since the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act of 1960 there has been a tacit consensus by central and local government of all parties that adequate Site provision (both permanent and transit) is the logical answer to the problem of unauthorised roadside Sites and encampments.

Among stakeholders with whom I have spoken there is a perception that the new government shares this acknowledgement of the need for additional authorised sites.

Currently, local authorities spend over £18 million a year evicting Travellers from unauthorised locations.

Evidence suggests that costs can be drastically reduced if councils invest in an authorised alternative. Bristol City Council created two sites in the mid - 90s . Its enforcement costs have subsequently fallen from £200,000 a year to a current yearly average of £5000.

The other knock on effect is that residents on authorised sites pay rent and council tax. This is what allows the Fenland policy to operate so effectively and to sustain itself.

Obviously sites that are set up without planning permission allow tensions to rise and good relations to suffer.

Where well run authorised sites exist it is far easier for integration to occur – it is transparent that every member of the community is operating by the same rules , and site residents can share services such as health centres and schools far more easily.

However not even authorised sites can do away with the deep seated residual prejudice directed against Travellers by some members of the community.

There is a very serious responsibility and challenge for the media here – including the press at a local level, in presenting the positives of the Traveller community to their neighbours - as well as the problems when they occur.

In conclusion

Providing adequate accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers (including clear and accessible information on planning procedures) is perfectly possible , and could become a cornerstone to good relations in many local situations.

What seems to work for local authorities in dealing with Traveller issues includes :

- **Strong leadership and a commitment to long term solutions**
- **Sufficient site provision and a high standard of site management**
- **Good communications between Travellers and their neighbours – including the direct word of mouth communication that Travellers often prefer , possibly with a joint forum**

Forum meetings could alternate at the Site and the neighbouring town or village – nothing breaks down myths and barriers like meeting in each others' homes

Identify community leaders on sites or in a locality – there are many excellent Traveller bodies who could help with this - operating at a local , regional and national level. The West Midlands office of the Commission could also assist with this .

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