

Housing Committee - 16 October 2014
Transcript of Item 6: Gypsy and Traveller Site Provision in London
First Session

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): Our main item of business is Gypsy and Traveller provision. The session is going to be in two parts. We are going to have an open discussion first with contributions from the floor. Do keep those brief so that we can try to fit as many people in as possible. Then we will move on to a panel discussion with our guests. We will have roving microphones going around.

Can I just start off, then? How well is London doing in terms of accommodating the needs of the Gypsy and Traveller communities in London and what needs to be done? We will take a contribution there first. If you can say briefly where you are from and your name, that will help us as well. Thank you.

Marian Mahoney (from the floor): My name is Mrs Marian Mahoney. I was living at Eleanor Street - it is now called Old Willow Close. I am a Gypsy Traveller.

I have been an activist all my life and my experience is the Mayor never put any targets for Gypsy sites in Tower Hamlets in the London Plan and it was supposed to be that it was sent down to the councils. The councils just do not seem to be doing anything whatsoever about it. Actually, on our waiting list, there are 25 people at the moment, who have been there for the last three years. There are other children coming up on our sites who will need homes, which will probably come to another 25. There is no provision for them.

All over London, there has been no provision made for Gypsy and Traveller sites for the last 20 years. From my experience as an activist, I feel that we have been just left out of everything. When they can find room for garages, Tesco, Morrisons, whatever they want to find room for, they can. I cannot understand why my children cannot have a home the same as anybody else. When they build houses in London, they plan for how many people they need houses for. There is nothing at all for Gypsies and Travellers. I feel my family has been left out in the cold as well as everybody else in the Traveller and Gypsy communities. There does not seem to be any future for us and I feel that at this moment it is like we do not exist. As far as I am concerned, we are just outsiders and we do not really have any availability for us.

Actually, my children are ending up going into houses and reversing their roles from being Travellers and going into houses. There is no room on the site at the moment for them. There are 25 people on the waiting list and there are six pitches available. It is causing havoc amongst the Traveller and Gypsy communities. It is causing bad feeling. It is causing us to lose our ethnic minority status and it is also causing a lot of people to lose their culture.

Our children are going into houses and some people have been affected by mental health. My own daughter has. She has exchanged her home in Eleanor Street where she was born and reared, which is now Old Willow Close, and she has ended up living in a flat in Walthamstow with her children, with the railway line just over her and the main road outside. Her youngest is two and the other one is five. Her children have to come all the way from Walthamstow to school in Tower Hamlets every morning. Our lives are just devastated. I really feel that the councils are not doing anything whatsoever for Gypsy Travellers.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): Thanks for that. For you, the top priority would be the need for identifying new additional sites?

Marian Mahoney (from the floor): Yes, provision and the need. They do not even look for land for us.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): That has come across loudly and clearly. Many thanks for that contribution. Other contributions from anyone else?

Tracie Giles (from the floor): My name is Tracie Giles and I am an English Romany Gypsy and I live in the London Borough of Newham.

I currently live on one of the relocation sites for the London Olympics. We were relocated in 2007 and the site we now live on was poorly built. The Mayor gave a lot of money to relocate us and I do not know in that whole process exactly what happened, but towards the end they ran out of time and the site we are now living on is actually falling to bits around us, literally. However, the Mayor did give a commitment to move us back to where we originally were within the Olympic Park.

In 2011, residents were consulted on an option but were not told at that time that this was the only option. We were under the illusion that there were going to be options and now we have been told that that option has now gone. It is being used for affordable social housing and allotments and whatever. There is no option and there is no land to move us back. We have been left high and dry, really.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): You feel you are being left stranded on a temporary site which was never intended as a permanent site?

Tracie Giles (from the floor): Yes. Exactly. My second point is about the duty to co-operate. The London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) recently did its needs assessment for Gypsies and Travellers. Parkway Crescent is right outside of the Olympic Park and they did not consult and they did not take the needs of the Gypsies and the Travellers who have been in the borough for over 40 years on that site. They did not count the needs, let alone for the rest of the Travellers who live in the borough.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): Thank you for that. Any other contributions?

John Power (from the floor): My name is John Power. I am with the Camden Travellers Association. My wife and children and I moved to a place in Camden 34 years ago. We have been promised several places or sites and there was £700,000 given to the Council, but they said they could not find any land. We went out and we found the land for them, land that would never be used for building or anything. We approached them with this land and they said they would have to go through the owners and get permission and things like that. The money was sent back. The money did not have to go back until April 2015, but it has gone back from October 2013.

This law that they are trying to bring in, where people are not allowed to get sites when they are in houses, is going to destroy people.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): People are moving into houses as a temporary measure and then losing their allocation rights for a site?

John Power (Camden Travellers Association): Yes. It is taking away their culture from them. It is like if you see country people - we call them 'country people' - settled people. If you take away their land for vegetable plots and harvesting, it is not going to be very nice for them. Some of the Travellers are taking this very, very hard.

We have been there now 34 years, as I say, and there has been nothing done whatsoever. We have tried everything with the Council. We have abided by everything they have said. We have fitted in with the community. Yet it is no good.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): That is a really useful point. We will definitely pick up some of those issues around funding later on in the meeting. That was a really useful contribution. Thank you.

Bridy Purcell (from the floor): Hello, I am Bridy Purcell. Because there are shortages of sites, we have now been on a tolerated unauthorised site in Greenwich for the last 15 years, which you all have seen.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): We all visited that site. We visited your beautiful mobile, yes.

Bridy Purcell (from the floor): Yes. Trailer, by the way.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): Trailer. Sorry.

Bridy Purcell (from the floor): On the site, we have 10 adults and 25 children and two on the way. On our site, it is absolutely ridiculous. We have been there 15 years with no showers and no toilets. We have portable loos. The site is literally a bombshell.

Just behind us we have a big tarmac yard, at the bottom of us is a big waste factory and behind that is a cement factory, as you have all seen yourselves. The amount of dust is unbearable, literally, and the health problems have been very bad. My Granny went to the doctors and they told her she has the lungs of someone who has smoked for 40 years. She has never smoked in her life. All of our children get continuous ear infections, eye infections and everything because of all the dust around the camp.

Thankfully, we have very good schools and, for all of our children, we are keen for them to get an education. All they really need is a proper place to live. It is not much to ask for a bit of land where we can actually have showers and maybe even a proper kitchen block because we are all squashed in there. I am 17 years of age and I do not have a trailer. I share a trailer with my siblings.

We are being deprived of a space because we are not getting any further with the Council, really. It is like we are nothing, to be honest with you, because we are not getting any kind of help in any way. They sit there and they say, "Next year, next year". Where we are now, as you have all seen, the flats are going up. We are getting told now, "You will not be there for more than two more months". Where are we going to go after that?

There is no such thing as travelling and moving around anymore because we are not allowed to do that. Our cultures are being destroyed, basically. If we wanted to go and get anywhere to live, not only would there be no planning permission to get anywhere to live, but there is nowhere to go in London. That is worst of all for us.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): Thank you very much for that. As I say, we did visit your site and saw first-hand what you are having to go through.

Anne Marie O'Brien (from the floor): My name is Anne Marie O'Brien and I live in Newham and I have been talking for Travellers for quite a long time now in Newham, trying to get facilities for them and trying to get a site built there, but everybody knows our Mayor in Newham and he will probably be there a long time. I will probably be dead and he will still be there. He does not do anything for us. He does not recognise us.

It is very disappointing to know that we are a culture, we are people, we have our own culture and we accept every other person's culture and respect it, and we are not respected. We are not asking for much. We are not asking, "Give us this. Give us that". We are well able to look after ourselves. We are well able to look after these sites and run them properly. Only give us the land and put us into them.

I live in a house and I am blessed in the house, but in the house that I am in we are suffering from depression inside it because I do not have the support of my family for my daughters. My daughters have bipolar. They are depressed and one of them is suicidal because I am not with my family. They have put me into a culture that I know nothing about and now the National Health Service (NHS) has to pay the price for it because my daughters are in counselling, on medication and everything you could ask for. The NHS has to support my children now, all because we are in a society, in a house and in a community that we know nothing about.

It is not that we do not respect the community. We do, but we like our own community and we respect our own way of living. I do not think that is recognised in London. I do not think it is recognised by the councils. I know for sure it is not recognised in Newham. I know for sure it is not recognised. All I want is to know why is there not a caravan waiting list in Newham? Why is someone in Newham not saying, "Mrs O'Brien, we can call a meeting with you. We will try", not, "Do it", because I am asking for a miracle, but try.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): A formal waiting list is needed and identifying sites and that is essential to sustain the culture of the Gypsy and Traveller community, in your view?

Anne Marie O'Brien (from the floor): Yes. They do not have that in Newham. To be honest, it is very let down. It is very, very let down.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): Many thanks for that contribution.

Neil Pearce (from the floor): Thank you. My name is Neil Pearce, Housing Strategy Officer for the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham.

We have one permanent site in the Borough which accommodates 11 households. We have a relatively small Traveller community in the borough and a waiting list of about eight, which are of the Irish Traveller community. We have tried over the last two years to identify an area for a new site. That has come with its own planning problems, of course, but the big issue for us is the funding behind it. Of all the four sites, with their remediation issues, etc, the model we have come up with is anything between £1.2 million and £3.3 million. For a local authority in this culture of cuts at the moment to justify providing a site on that basis when that amount of money could also pay for 325 adaptations in our borough is quite difficult.

The way I am trying to couch this is that under the Affordable Homes Programme that the Greater London Authority (GLA) runs, there was some Traveller pitch funding, but its availability was very restricted. The timescale on it seemed to be only about two years.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): Barking & Dagenham Council bid for this?

Neil Pearce (from the floor): We bid for some refurbishment funding on our existing site, which we got. Looking for a new site with all the problems and political sensitivities that come with it, the timescale for which the GLA was offering money was not --

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): Your argument is that there were so many strings attached and the timescale was so tight that it was not practical to bid for the money?

Neil Pearce (from the floor): -- It was not practical. I would like to appeal to the GLA to say that in the long term you need to think about providing funding, if you are going to provide funding, that it takes in the longevity of those issues. It is planning, it is political sensitivities and it is site assembly and identification, which we cannot match in that two-year gap.

Tom Copley AM (Deputy Chair): It is two years from the date of funding you have to use it and you cannot identify the issues beforehand?

Neil Pearce (from the floor): We came up with a site that we thought we might be able to progress with recently and the GLA said, "Sorry, the funding has been withdrawn now. There is no more to it". We got over two years' worth of political sensitivities to say, "We may be on to something", and then it was gone.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): OK. We will come on to that. We are going to discuss funding and we will be putting questions to our officers here on the funding. At the moment, I really want to hear the contributions from the floor.

Phil Regan (from the floor): Thank you. Hi. My name is Phil Regan. I am a volunteer with the Kensington and Chelsea Social Council.

My experience from across London is pretty much talking specifically around needs assessment and whether they are an accurate projection for future need. As we know, the Fordham¹ figures recommended 540 and actually organisations lobbying at the time looked more at 800 pitches. From my understanding, we have about 10 pitches in London that have been built so far. Whether it reflects a need, the need is still there. There are still those 500 to 800 people who need homes.

To talk specifically around Kensington and Chelsea and its method of delivering its needs assessment, in essence, it has been delayed as much as possible. It has taken a hell of a lot of lobbying from voluntary organisations as well as supporting national Gypsy and Traveller organisations to get the authorities to deliver a needs assessment. What I would say is that when they first did their needs assessment, it was a desk-based analysis which reduced the Fordham figure from 12 down to 2. They are now doing a thorough needs assessment but it is going to be due - surprise, surprise - in February next year. It is great timing for the next election, which will mean that nothing will happen next year.

What I would say is, if you guys are looking to do an additional London-wide needs assessment, it needs to happen hand-in-hand with pitch development. Needs assessments are used by local authorities as vehicles to stall actually building sites.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): That is a useful point.

Richard Lee (from the floor): My name is Richard Lee. I co-ordinate a community planning network called Just Space. It is London-wide.

I start by mentioning that we represent a very wide variety of community organisations across London: tenants groups, environmental groups, communities of interest, amenity groups and also the London Gypsy and Traveller Unit. Our experience was that before the London Gypsy and Traveller Unit became a member of Just Space, a number of the residents associations we work with were expressing a lot of anxiety and prejudice about the issue of provision for Travellers. As soon as the London Gypsy and Traveller Unit became part of our

¹ *London Boroughs' Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment*, Fordham Research, March 2008

network and Travellers were sitting down and having discussions and sharing experiences with other members of the community, the prejudice very quickly dissolved and for a number of years now there has been a common cause around the issue of housing need.

I mention that to start with because it seems to me that some of the reluctance, shall we say, from the boroughs is based on perhaps a fear of a community backlash. Our experience actually is that we can overcome this and that maybe the big policy question for the GLA is around how we actually integrate provision for Gypsies and Travellers within the overall housing provision and other community provisions. For example, recognise loud and clear that Travellers have a housing need. It may be a minority housing need, but there are lots of other minority housing needs and this is definitely a housing need. It is not something out there and quite separate to this.

Secondly, in terms of site allocations, our experience is that sometimes when suggestions come forward for a site and it is purely a Traveller site proposal, yes, it can create some questioning at a community level. When it is proposed as a mixed site in which there are some Traveller pitches and lots of other community provisions being proposed within that site allocation, it is much easier to get a win-win situation with all those involved.

Thirdly, there are neighbourhood forums. I noticed one of your questions is asking about local solutions. In my experience working with a number of neighbourhood forums across London, I do not know one which is actually thinking about and engaging with the issue of provision within its neighbourhood forum area for Gypsies and Travellers. There needs to be encouragement at a policy level so that neighbourhood forums are actually thinking about this. It could be a very progressive thing.

Finally, on the policy level, yes, everyone has to sign up to these issues with an integrated approach and that includes the Mayor of London, who has a clear responsibility to co-ordinate the provision London-wide.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): The clear lessons there from you are the need for dialogue and calm discussion through forums and so on and also the need for an integrated approach in terms of policy. Yes, thank you.

Debby Kennett (from the floor): My name is Debby Kennett from the London Gypsy and Traveller Unit. I just wanted to give the example of identifying land. With the sites that are now in the Olympic Park, the two sites, one in Hackney and one in Newham, the families found themselves in the middle of the Olympic development. Obviously, there was a big issue at the time and we were very involved in supporting the community that was faced with relocation. The Councils said they did not have land to relocate the sites. However, in this case, they had to find land to relocate the sites because the Olympic developments were at stake. When they had to find land, they did find land.

We know from our experience that when it is just left down to the councils, either there is no political will to identify land and build sites or there are all kinds of obstacles. We really need the Mayor to take a strategic view on this, to recognise the need for targets on councils and to support councils in delivering. In the case of the Olympic sites, they did identify land. They had to change some land use. They built one site on Metropolitan Open Land. They found land within the immediate area and they relocated 35 pitches as a result of the Olympics. That was really my point.

The other point I wanted to make was about unauthorised encampments. I think you have a question about unauthorised encampments. I understand there is somebody from Leeds Council talking here about examples of good practice.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): Yes, we will be hearing from Leeds soon.

Debby Kennett (from the floor): Yes. I really think that councils need to take a much more tolerant approach --

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): Do you think we could learn from Leeds, then?

Debby Kennett (from the floor): Yes. Leeds is a good example there with negotiated stopping. That is what we need to be looking at. I know in Hackney previously they had a similar approach. More recently, unfortunately, they have taken a different approach and have taken more of an approach of evicting families.

However, it needs to be recognised that evicting families from unauthorised encampments only pushes them from borough to borough and, actually, working with families, councils and landowners to identify suitable land for a temporary period of time slows down evictions and helps children going to school and families accessing healthcare. That should be looked at very seriously.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): Excellent. That is very, very helpful. The key messages from you, then, are the need for a London-wide approach and also to look at best practice from other parts of the country and how we can make use of that.

Marian Mahoney (from the floor): On education, the law says you have to educate your child. The law says you have to send them to school. However, when you are being put on unauthorised sites and you are being sent from there to there to there, they are not getting educated. They are not getting the right to learn and an education. Then they blame the parents. The parents want them to be educated, but they also want them to know their tradition.

It comes down to the education and the modern sickness part of it and the Government is confused because they are looking at one thing and meaning another thing. Do you know what I mean? They want to look and recognise that Travellers do need to be educated because everybody needs to be educated. I had not been educated, I had to educate myself, but my daughters are getting educated and I want them to get educated. The Government needs to understand that unless they are in an environment where they can go to school and are not pushed from pillar to post, they need to recognise the education part of it as well and not pull these caravans to the next borough, "They are Travellers. Just get them out of here", and to the next borough, "They are Travellers. Get them out of here". They need to understand that Traveller people need to be educated and they do need to be recognised.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): In terms of looking at the overall accommodation provision and permanent sites and so on, we need to be thinking about the wider arguments around education provision and so on and that is going to disrupt schooling. Does anyone else at this stage want to contribute before we move on to our panellists? Is there anything anyone else would like to say at this stage? No. Thank you so much. That has given us an awful lot to talk about. It is good to hear particularly the first-hand experiences of people in the Gypsy and Traveller communities and we did get a real taste of that when we did our two site visits recently as well. Thank you very much.

We understand that some of you may have to go at some point. Do not worry if you are not able to stay for the whole meeting, but obviously you are very, very welcome to stay for the whole meeting and we will keep you up-to-date on the progress with our work here. One final contribution?

Phil Regan (from the floor): It is not a contribution. It is more of a comment. There are four questions you have [on the provided briefing]. Is there opportunity for the floor to interject in any parts of the questioning?

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): We do have a lot to get through. If there are some really burning points from the floor and we are doing OK for time, then I am going to be lenient, but it is going to be hard work because we do have an awful lot to get to. If there are some really burning points, then I will try my best to accommodate, but we will be quite pushed for time. I do really welcome your contributions because whatever we do on this Committee, whatever types of housing or accommodation we look at, we do want to hear directly from those who live there and from those who are affected. It is no good just hearing from the policy experts, the officers and so on. We really welcome your contribution.

Phil Regan (from the floor): Just one more point, please? I am just basically saying that the London Plan left it to local authorities, as you all know, to identify land and to meet that need. Given that fewer than ten pitches have been developed in the capital since 2008, this is clearly not working.

I wondered whether the Assembly and the Mayor are considering the economic argument laterally that mobile homes cost significantly less than bricks-and-mortar accommodation. You can rent a mobile home for between £150 and £200 a week. Actually, with houses, as we all know, you would be lucky to get a shed for the same price. Are local authorities, when they are looking to cut back so much, not considering private sites, community sites or local authority sites as a way of actually saving money on their housing benefit revenues?

It is just that there are people out there who are looking at business propositions and whether or not a private land scheme across London could hold a solution where the local authorities are failing to act.

Darren Johnson AM (Chair): That is really useful. It was a point about the wider economic benefits, potentially. We will explore that in our discussions. Thank you.