

# The provision of sites for Gypsy, Roma and Travellers

## Summary of engagement

### **Background**

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As part of the Local Government and Housing Committee's inquiry into 'The provision of sites for Gypsy, Roma and Travellers', the Citizen Engagement Team proposed a qualitative approach to engagement, comprising a series of discussion groups with members of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities across Wales.

This summary paper is based upon contributions made by members of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities during a series of site visits, roundtable discussions and a one-to-one telephone interview, between 26 May - 28 June 2022.

### **Contributors**

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Contributors were recruited through Travelling Ahead and Gypsies and Travellers Wales.

Contributor composition varied with contributions received from members of five local authority and three private sites, across four Senedd regions - Mid and West Wales, North Wales, South Wales Central and South Wales East.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the programme of engagement.

### **Format**

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Five site visits took place. The format of engagement was informal and largely comparable across all sites, but varied slightly to meet the needs of diverse communities. Two roundtable lunch discussions were held at the Senedd and



one telephone interview, with the topics discussed largely mirroring those explored during site visits, again with some variation.

Due to the informal nature of the engagement, the Committee's desire to visit sites, and the inherent challenges of capturing a comprehensive note 'on the move', verbatim notes of all discussions were not possible.

The following themes emerged from the discussions.

## **Planning issues**

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The majority of contributors based on private sites discussed at length, issues related to planning permission. Whilst experiences evidently varied across the programme of engagement, views of the planning system were predominantly negative, particularly when discussing the extension of sites.

A number of contributors shared anecdotal accounts of the challenges faced when navigating the planning process, which included financial barriers and a lack of advice and support. The difficulties faced in securing planning permission often meant that very little space was available to accommodate growing families, which resulted in succession issues. One contributor went further and explained that planning issues and the challenges associated with acquiring suitable land, pervades all facets of the process, and is often rooted in discrimination. As an example, he explained that estate agents will pretend that suitable land is unavailable when a Gypsy family makes enquiries.

Contributors shared the reasons given by local authorities to justify the refusal of planning permission. These included, but not exclusively, potential flooding issues on an access road which could prevent access for emergency services, and the speed limit of access roads to sites.

Some contributors explained that planning consent, had on occasion been met with hostility from some residents in the local area. This included calling members of the Gypsy and Traveller communities, "*filthy*", and suggesting that an increase in theft and anti-social behaviour was likely. Prejudice and discrimination against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities was commonplace according to most contributors who discussed the matter, with negative media portrayals and long-held stereotypes given as the causes.

One contributor cited a lack of consistency in approach from the local authority when dealing with planning matters. As an example, she explained that permission was granted for one caravan and one static, but there were additional caravans on the site on which she lives, without permission.

## **Relationship with local authority**

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Discussion on planning issues were often intertwined with issues relating to contributors' relationship with their respective local authority. Whilst not always exclusively negative (some contributors mentioned positive relationships with some local authority staff), the challenges of engaging with their local authority were often frequent and varied.

As an example, one contributor explained that she had been asked by her local authority to cut down trees on her site. Whilst she had no issue in doing so, she explained that it was the local authority who has asked her to plant the trees in the first place, so as to ensure the site would not be visible from the roadside.

There was a feeling amongst many contributors that their local authority was not sensitive to the unique needs of their communities. They criticised the local authority for failing to listen, particularly in relation to issues of site maintenance. For example, one contributor explained that resources are often spent on matters which do not need addressing, like the recent resurfacing of a road, which the community felt was unnecessary. Others felt that local authorities can often be inconsistent in their approach to matters, which can create difficulties within communities.

A contributor based on a site in north Wales explained that they have a very difficult relationship with their local authority. They explained that the local authority have paid a private security firm to act as a liaison, which they described as "*outsourcing the problem.*"

## **Consultation with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.**

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The challenging relationship many contributors had with their local authority was, in part, rooted in the latter's failure to communicate effectively with communities, according to contributors.

Some contributors explained that they would welcome the opportunity to engage in meaningful consultation about the sites they live on. This included being able to influence the site layout and refurbishment plans. As an example, one participant explained that they were asked whether they would like an attic in their day room. They agreed to have one, but the attic has since been locked and is not accessible to those on site – the council hold the keys. They also explained that they have not been given permission to make adaptations to their day rooms and are not allowed to treat them like their own homes.

The majority of contributors agreed that whilst inclusive engagement with communities is important, a clear and well-communicated course of action should follow. Some described feeling “*left in the dark*” following consultation, with many feeling disillusioned with the process.

### **Location and condition of sites**

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The location and condition of sites was a theme which permeated much of the discussion across the programme of engagement.

Some participants described their site, and the access to it as dangerous, with others explaining that their site was not fit for purpose and detrimental to the health and wellbeing of residents.

Varied and numerous anecdotal accounts of disrepair were shared, often supported by photographs provided by contributors, or witnessed in person by Members of the Committee during site visits. This not only included the deterioration of existing shared facilities which had not been refurbished in decades, but the complete lack of facilities such as a play area for their children. Others reported issues with uneven plots, lack of footpaths, blocked drains, rat infestations and mouldy bathrooms.

Many contributors explained that when maintenance issues are reported to the local authority, or those responsible for site management, any measures proposed to address those issues take a long time to action. One participant explained that during a meeting with her local authority, she was informed that the local authority is not obligated to carry out maintenance on sites in the same amount of time they would to local authority owned houses. She also described the level of work as “*the worst possible building standard you can think of.*” This mirrored experiences shared by many other contributors across the programme of engagement.

When discussing how they would like to see their site improved, some contributors explained that they would like to be near a zebra crossing, a school, amenities like shops, and a park. Some contributors also emphasised the need for emergency vehicles to be able to access their site.

“If there was a fire on Castle Quarry, the whole of the quarry would just go up in flames because they’ve put people together so close there’s some people that can’t even park their car on their slab.”

## Cultural awareness

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The over-crowded nature of many of the larger local authority sites in particular, often meant that in addition to a lack of privacy, the fractious relationships between some families and/or residents, created a hostile and sometimes dangerous environment.

One contributor gave an example of a site which was intended for Irish Travellers, but English Travellers were also permitted to live on site. This created an environment one contributor described as “*unsafe*”.

Some contributors explained that it was common for authorities to treat Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families in the same way, often with little regard for cultural nuances and the distinct requirements of different communities. One contributor based on a local authority site explained that local authorities will often apply standards, intended for housing, to caravans and trailers, essentially disregarding the unique needs of these communities.

Whilst some contributors explained that communities and the way they live may evolve over time which could, for example, include someone choosing to move into a house, those who choose to continue living a traditional way of life should be respected and supported.

“We’re treated like second class citizens. I left my site because of overcrowding because at one point, there was me, my mam and my brother on one slab - there wasn’t anywhere for us to go. So now I live in a house. I had to leave what I knew, what I grew up doing, to have a better quality of life for me, my husband and my children.”