

# The provision of sites for Gypsy, Roma and Travellers

## Note of focus group

5 December 2024

### Background

1. As part of the Local Government and Housing Committee's follow-up work into the provision of sites for Gypsy, Roma and Travellers, the Committee engaged with community members during a hybrid focus group at the Senedd.
2. The Committee met with 8 members of Gypsy and Traveller communities across four Senedd regions. 7 contributors had shared their views with the Committee during site visits and roundtable discussions when the inquiry was initially undertaken in 2022.
3. Community members were supported by representatives from Travelling Ahead, Gypsies Travellers Wales, There And Back Again and a Councillor.

### Discussion

4. Discussion focused on the following themes, which were shared with contributors ahead of time.
  - Whether the community is aware of, or has seen signs that local authorities are investing in the development of new or existing local authority sites, including new pitches and infrastructure such as utilities and play parks.



- Whether the community is broadly aware of the Gypsy Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA) process, and whether they felt involved in the most recent assessment.
- Any signs of change in the last two years in how local authorities and the Welsh Government engage with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community.
- Whether there is anything about their housing needs that have got worse over the last two years/ any further issues they would like to make the Committee aware of.

5. The following themes emerged from the discussion.

### **Condition of sites**

6. The condition of local authority sites was discussed at length by most contributors and emerged as the principal theme during the discussion. A number of issues were highlighted, with several examples shared:-

- **Disrepair**

Whilst several contributors shared examples of varying degrees of disrepair on sites, a stark example was illustrated by a contributor from Pembrokeshire. When she last engaged with the Committee on 27 June 2022, a PowerPoint presentation was shared documenting multiple issues of disrepair on Castle Quarry, Kingsmoor Common and Waterloo sites. In the interim, only one issue has been resolved, which was completed during the week this focus group was held.

Examples were given of utility sheds and outhouses being unusable. They were described as “*abysmal*” and in “*disarray*”. She explained that the outhouses are in such poor condition, parents will wash and change their children into pyjamas as soon as they are home from school as they are too cold to use in the evenings.

- **Location and size of sites**

The suitability of land identified by local authorities to accommodate sites was another key issue, with contributors explaining that they are often located next to rivers, motorways, scrap yards and tips.

One contributor described 3 – 4 families living on a plot that is “*not much bigger than a prison cell*” where they are “*squashed in like a sardine tin.*”

A contributor from Wrexham criticised the layout of the local authority site on which she lives, explaining that there is only one way to enter and leave the site. Due to its location, it is dangerous for children to cross the road safely as there are no zebra crossings.

One attendee, who was supporting a community member to contribute, referenced a report by Councillor Judith Woodman in 2006, which said that Rover Way, Cardiff would be relocated by 2010. She also explained that there are plans to turn the tip next door to the site into a battery unit. The land includes asbestos, tyres and junk. Community members have not been consulted on proposals.

- **Pollution**

Several contributors described issues with pollution on site, with a poignant example being shared by one contributor whose family has a child who is unwell. He explained that the conditions are not fit for a child, maintaining that “*a child needs a decent place to live.*”

- **Rat infestations**

Whilst not all had rat infestations on site, this was an issue for some contributors with one describing “*rats as big as dogs*”.

**7.** The impact of these issues on the physical and mental wellbeing of those living on site was raised by a number of contributors, with one explaining that it “*destroys people’s lives.*”

## **Local authority approach to site maintenance**

**8.** Local authorities were accused of allowing sites to deteriorate before applying for funding to resolve the issues. Contributors asserted that local authorities should have taken greater care of the sites from the outset.

**9.** One contributor from Pembrokeshire explained that Pembrokeshire County Council has only recently adopted a timeframe for addressing the issues identified by community members living at Castle Quarry. She contrasted the experiences of those living on site with those living in a council (bricks and mortar) property,

where issues are managed via a traffic light system. She queried whether the same problem may exist across other local authority areas. It was noted that they would not want to see a new site being developed in Pembrokeshire because it would end up in the same condition, so there would be no support from the community for new sites until the local authority can demonstrate that it is able to look after existing sites.

**10.** One attendee, who was supporting a community member to contribute during the discussion, explained that he had outlined to her a backlog of site repairs, some of which had been outstanding for two years. Difficulties were experienced in identifying who was responsible for completing the repairs, as well as the fractious relationship between the registered social landlord and those living on site. An Excel spreadsheet detailing the backlog of work was prepared and subsequently escalated to the Chief Executive of the local authority. This *“unplugged things a little”*, and the list was eventually completed after approximately 18 months. She called for a need to recognise the autonomy and independent living of a community whose lifestyle and culture has been *“systematically eroded by the establishment”* and the need to draw on legislation (the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan was referenced) to address the unjust treatment of these communities.

**11.** Another attendee, who was supporting community members to contribute during the discussion, explained that local authorities do not have service standards. As such, whilst an individual living on site can report a repair, there is no follow-up or timescale given. She also questioned the quality of the repairs, which was echoed by other contributors. She described people left feeling *“demoralised”* and accused the local authority of taking rent from people for pitches, without giving anything back.

## **Utilities**

**12.** Several contributors raised concerns regarding the cost of rent and utilities, with one contributor explaining that the amount she pays in a two bedroom house is far less than what her relative pays for *“an outbuilding and a concrete pitch that’s crumbling.”*

**13.** One attendee, who was supporting a community member during the focus group, explained that families living on sites are on water and electric meters. When the meter runs out, families are left without water. She spoke to Welsh Water who confirmed it was against the law for families to be left without water on a residential site. She explained that the issue is that the local authority is the

customer, as opposed to the individual community member. She also explained that electric meters cannot be “*read in money, they can only be read in kilo wats*” which made it difficult to gauge cost. She said that they can only get a top up directly from the local authority.

**14.** One contributor argued that local authorities have no understanding of what the needs of Gypsy and Traveller communities. He referenced the support towards utility bills but noted that “*normal gas*” does not work with their caravans – connecting to the main gas supply would mean changing valves, which comes at a cost. He called for this fuel poverty money to go directly to the community, instead of via the local authority, for them to decide how to spend it.

## **Persecution**

**15.** There was consensus amongst contributors that very little to no progress has been made on providing new or improving existing sites since last engaging with the Committee.

**16.** Several contributors were critical of their local authority, explaining that they had experienced persecution and racism by local authority staff. Some also explained that they had experienced persecution by the police, who had visited their site on multiple occasions.

**17.** One contributor shared an example of the difficulties he has experienced with Newport City Council. He explained that he had lived on a private site throughout the pandemic, but since restrictions have eased, he has been instructed by Newport City Council to vacate the land as they wish to turn it back into a field. A planning enforcement officer from Newport City Council arrived on site with six police officers and a digger. The site was dug up and pig excrement dumped on the yard. He also explained that he was falsely accused of having a puppy farm on site. Despite raising concerns directly with Newport City Council and the Ombudsman, the site is still subject to an enforcement order. He described it as “*persecution at a high level.*”

**18.** When asked whether there had been any progress on site at Rover Way, Cardiff, one contributor described the site as having been “*condemned*” and “*not fit for humans.*”

**19.** Many contributors shared several negative examples of interactions with their local authority. One contributor described experiencing “*nothing but hassle*”, adding that the relationship with site management has deteriorated to such an extent, they no longer allow them on site.

**20.** When discussing the difficulties securing planning permission for their land, several contributors described being obstructed at every stage.

**21.** One contributor explained that she had made an application which was recommended for approval by her case officer, and in turn referred to the planning committee by the local councillor. She explained the councillor attempted to drum up support from her neighbours by scaremongering them to write letters of objection. The councillor then participated in the meeting and voted against the application, which the contributor felt breached the code of conduct as she had already made her decision. She then resubmitted her application which was refused by the same caseworker. She has since submitted an appeal on his advice as he said any positive recommendation from him will result in a referral to the planning committee, although he cannot guarantee a positive outcome. She said she feels councillors have to act on their residents' needs to keep favour, rather than the needs of the Gypsy and Traveller community. She said that despite having a young child with several medical issues, she was issued an enforcement notice without any sites offered as an alternative. The dispute has had a significant impact on her financial situation and mental health.

### **Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessments (GTAA's)**

**22.** One contributor explained that Flintshire County Council is building a transit site consisting of five pitches and a new permanent traveller site comprising ten pitches, beside an existing riverside caravan park. However, she is not aware of any application being submitted. She explained that the background paper proposes building on what she described as contaminated land adjacent to a sewage works, which is unfit for human occupation. The local development plan (LDP) has identified and allocated three plots of land in Mancot, Ewloe and Buckley in the Green Wedge to build a large scale housing development for the settled community.

**23.** She explained that the GTAA is grossly miscalculated. Without building any additional sites and spending any money, the local authority has managed to meet its shortfall of 23 pitches by approaching family-run, private site owners (that they previously objected to) and offering them extensions to their sites, which are only accessible to their immediate family members. If these pitches are not accessible to all members of the Gypsy and Traveller community they should not be counted in the GTAA.

**24.** The contributor took part in the 2015 GTAA, explaining that she recalls many people did not take part as they did not understand what the survey was for. She believes this contributed to a lower number of plots than what was needed. This is something that needs to be addressed in future to ensure they have the correct information for the GTAA. Until these ten plots are built and accessible to all, they should not be counted in the GTAA.

**25.** One contributor noted that the only way members of the Gypsy and Traveller community can live in North Wales is on a local authority site. They called on the Welsh Government to help with funding private sites, to enable people to live on their own land, instead of funding sites through local authorities only, especially as local authorities have stopped Gypsies and Travellers from being able to live on the road.

## **Engagement**

**26.** Contributors maintained there had not been any improvement in the way local authorities engage with Gypsy and Traveller communities, with one contributor describing *“hatred toward Gypsy people.”*

**27.** One contributor explained that local authorities will often *“shy away”* from visiting sites and will instead use organisations like Travelling Ahead and Gypsies Travellers Wales as a conduit through which to engage with communities.

**28.** Council officials will often fail to attend scheduled meetings with community members, according to some contributors. Some described being treated as *“outcasts”* and *“second class citizens”*, whilst others maintained that local authorities have *“no interest in Gypsies.”*

**29.** One contributor explained that Gypsies and Travellers were not allowed to contribute or share their point of view during council meetings and called on the Welsh Government to hold councils to account *“and fine them.”*

**30.** Another contributor explained that she has been living on an unauthorised encampment for six months whilst in the appeals process. She has not received any contact from the Gypsy Liaison Officer or local authority, other than a planning application refusal, followed by an enforcement notice. No welfare checks have been made.

**31.** One attendee, who supported a community member to contribute during the discussion, maintained that engagement with communities is irrelevant if

little to no progress is made. She maintained the focus should be on action as opposed to engagement.

## **Solutions**

**32.** Whilst much of the discussion focused on the lack of progress, several contributors were eager to offer solutions to some of the issues identified.

- The Welsh Government should help members of the community build their own sites by providing funding. One contributor asserted that *“we should be owning, running and managing these sites. We need to be in charge of our own lives.”*

Several contributors agreed that their living situation would be far better if they were able to own and manage their own sites. One contributor explained that they did not want to own their own site - many cannot afford it. However, they wanted a decent place to live with adequate facilities and timely repairs.

- Unlike on a council estate, where there is a maintenance schedule and programme, that is not the case with local authority owned traveller sites. Some contributors called on local authorities to provide maintenance schedules for each site.
- Contributors called for local authorities to be held accountable for failing to turn up to meetings, wasting public money and imposing red tape on Gypsy Traveller communities.