

# Looking Back, Moving Forward

Assessing the housing needs of  
Gypsies and Travellers in Essex

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## Executive Summary



## Introduction

Taking appropriate steps to resolve both perceived and actual inequalities in our society is a vital way to foster and sustain cohesion within the communities in which we live. In terms of Gypsies and Travellers, the increased provision of legal sites has historically been seen as the most effective way of reducing tensions concerning Gypsy and Travellers with the settled community and improving the life chances of individuals from Gypsy and Traveller backgrounds. Since the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, purchasing private land for site development has also been the emphasis. However, the current lack of accommodation needs assessments conducted with Gypsies and Travellers means that at the moment, as research from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) has shown, the need for appropriate accommodation significantly outweighs provision. As a result, many Gypsies and Travellers have either been 'forced' into 'bricks-and-mortar' social housing which many desire to leave, accommodate themselves on unauthorised encampments or live on land they own without the correct planning permission (unauthorised developments).

The introduction of the Housing Act 2004 placed a duty on local authorities to develop and implement accommodation strategies to address the needs of Gypsy and Traveller communities, and these strategies need to be informed by an understanding of the accommodation needs of Gypsies and Travellers. It is now considered good practice for local authorities to jointly commission such assessments thus complying with not only the ODPM's emphasis on adopting regional strategic housing approaches, but also reflecting the cross-authority boundary transience of this group.

In response, the Essex Planning Officers Association commissioned the Salford Housing & Urban Studies Unit, based at the University of Salford, to undertake a comprehensive study to assess the accommodation needs of the Gypsies and Travellers living across Essex.

## Essex: The context

Gypsies and Travellers have long featured in the population of Essex County. Each local/unitary authority has a Gypsy and Traveller Local Plan Policy and there is a countywide joint protocol for managing unauthorised developments. As with many areas across the United Kingdom, over the years the numbers of Gypsies and Travellers within Essex has been in constant flux. It is unclear, however, how much of this has to do with traditions of nomadism, the search for work and employment and/or the effects of being moved on from settling on unauthorised land. According to the most recently available Caravan Count data for the Region there is a reported total of 1159 caravans based across the area to which the study relates. This figure includes 442 on unauthorised developments, 349 on authorised council sites and 368 caravans on authorised private sites. (See Table 1)



Table 1: Count of Gypsy caravans as of 19th July 2005

Local/Unitary Authority	Total	Unauthorised encampments	Authorised council sites	Authorised private sites	Mean of last 5 counts (July 03-July 05)
Basildon	350	172	34	144	339
Braintree	96	43	42	11	74
Brentwood	39	21	0	18	32
Castle Point	2	2	0	0	6
Chelmsford	142	60	34	48	142
Colchester	22	11	0	11	22
Epping Forest	162	51	22	89	166
Harlow	65	0	65	0	49
Maldon	39	0	39	0	51
Rochford	16	14	0	2	14
Southend-on-Sea	0	0	0	0	0
Tendring	29	29	0	0	20
Thurrock	130	31	89	10	155
Uttlesford	67	8	24	35	80
Total	1159	442	349	368	1150



According to the Caravan Count the East of England region is the area with the highest recorded number of caravans in England. The share of both the Region and England as a whole attributed to Essex County can be seen in table 2.

**Table 2: Percentage of Essex share of sites and pitches by East of England region and total for England as of 19th July 2005.**

	Total	Unauthorised encampments	Authorised council sites	Authorised private sites
Essex County	1159	442	349	368
England	15711	4067	6458	5186
% of which is Essex County	7.4	10.9	5.4	7.1
East of England	3983	1201	1382	1400
% of which is Essex County	29.1	36.8	25.3	26.3

Table 2 above highlights three particular issues.

1. There is a trend for there to be disproportionately more caravans classified as unauthorised in Essex than is characteristic of the East of England region or England as a whole.
2. Essex County also appears to host over a third of the unauthorised developments across the East of England region.
3. When compared to the total for England as a whole, the proportion of unauthorised developments across Essex equates to the combined number of those that are seen as authorised (both council and private) sites.

Overall, from such data there appears to be a large number of Gypsies and Travellers that are staying on sites in and across Essex on an unauthorised basis. This appears to be unevenly distributed across the various local/unitary authority boundaries (see table 1).

## Aims and Objectives

The study had the overarching aim of providing reliable evidence to inform the allocation of sites for Gypsies and Travellers in forthcoming development plans across the East of England region and to include this, historically little known about community group, in needs assessments. This was accomplished by a number of objectives

- Gathering information on current tenure types and aspirations/future needs and tenure preferences for caravan dwelling/movement between housing and caravans;
- Ascertaining attitudes to current site provision (council and private provision); presence on unauthorised encampments;
- Gathering data on household composition and demography including patterns of extended family living;
- Identifying migration patterns and transient settlement patterns;
- Gathering information on employment trends and barriers to access of training and education opportunities;
- Identifying health care needs and access to appropriate services;
- Gathering data on educational requirements, accessibility and peer group integration;
- Gathering information to ascertain the expected rate of new household formation and composition;
- Ascertaining the degree to which Essex Councils' housing waiting and transfer lists reflect housing need; and
- Determining the degree to which local authority Gypsy site waiting lists reflects site accommodation needs.

## Methodology

Since each group in society presents certain challenges and dilemmas in this type of assessment, specialist approaches for consultation and data collection needed to be appropriately tailored and applied. To this end, a flexible qualitative approach was adopted in order to negotiate a more appropriate methodology with this historically under-researched group and our approach evolved out of consultation with a range of key stakeholders. As Gypsies and Travellers have a particular oral culture that influences the way they understand and explain the world around them, and in line with the draft practice guidance to emerge from the ODPM, a semi-structured interview format (a 'qualitative' approach), centred around a number of 'key questions', was adopted. In total 72 people were interviewed and this included Irish Travellers, English 'Romany' Gypsies and those that described themselves as having 'mixed' ethnicity. A total of 8 young people were also involved and 80% of the participants were women. In addition, focus groups were also held with a number of representative services of provider organisations; housing, planning, site managers, traveller education and multi-agency professionals from across Essex.

## Implications & Conclusions

The study revealed a number of issues around the accommodation needs of Gypsies and Travellers which have been considered under a number of themes:

### Current tenure types and aspirations

- The sample for this study was made up of 61% from unauthorised developments, 28% from local authority sites, 6% from privately owned authorised sites, 3% in 'bricks and mortar' housing and 2% from unauthorised encampments.
- Future aspirations varied according to tenure: those on the private sites (both authorised and unauthorised) expressed a preference for owning their own land and in the main did not want to rent from the local authority. In contrast, those from the local authority sites in general did not wish to purchase their own land.
- A small minority (11%) of the whole sample indicated that they would consider house dwelling as an option. At present, a number of housing departments based within authorities in Essex do not keep records of homeless applications from Gypsies and Travellers. Furthermore, it is unlikely that waiting lists for social housing (which historically have not monitored applications from these communities by ethnicity) or indeed council run sites would be an accurate indicator of unmet need given the large proportion of Gypsies and Travellers who would not apply for this type of provision, feeling that there would be no point due to scarcity.

### Attitudes to Council and private provision

- Those living on Council run sites in the main expressed high levels of satisfaction with local authority sites and felt that these met their needs, while those on private developments (authorised and unauthorised) expressed a preference for living on their own land and indicated that they preferred to be in control of whom they lived next door to.

### Migration patterns and transient settlement patterns

- Few of the Gypsies and Travellers in Essex who participated in the study indicated that they wished to pursue an active travelling lifestyle (2 respondents in total).
- The majority of participants, across tenure, expressed a wish to be settled on a pitch and travel for short periods/holidays only.
- If more transitory sites/stopping places were available the majority of those who were interviewed claimed they would be likely to travel more.
- The majority of the Gypsies and Travellers participating in the study have 'settled' in a caravan and stay on land that they have purchased or rent from the council. There was limited reporting of travelling outside of the Essex area and again this was described as 'holidays'. Almost all of the Gypsies and Travellers we spoke to regarded Essex (rather than the borough they lived in) as 'home' and the place they intended to stay.



## Employment, education and health

- In general those women who participated in the study were not in any form of employment.
- In general, the men were involved in a range of unskilled jobs including tree-topping, tarmac laying and groundwork.
- Access to health and education tended to be good where Gypsies and Travellers were settled on a pitch, children on council sites however were more likely to be home educated.
- In terms of ascertaining economic and income levels, participants generally were reluctant to discuss both income obtained via employment or welfare.

## Estimated household formation and composition 2006-2016

- There are currently 442 Gypsies and Travellers on unauthorised encampments across Essex and provision for this group needs to be addressed immediately.
- Due to a lack of official modelling on projections for household formation of Gypsy and Traveller communities and projected need for site development a model was developed to provide some indication of future site/pitch need. This involved synthesising data obtained during the study around caravan occupancy levels and household formation rates with existing information contained in the local caravan count and the estimated rate of local population/household growth identified by Office for National Statistics/ODPM. This model was used to estimate the number of projected caravans/households which in turn can inform decisions for future site provision.
- It is estimated that if current trends continue, by 2016 there would be 59 new Gypsy and Traveller households across Essex which equates to a total population increase of 236. This means that provision will have to be made for 118 new caravans or 59 new pitches.

## Aspirations for accommodation

- Based upon our sample 25% wished to live on authorised Council sites, 64% on authorised private sites whilst 11% indicated that if appropriate 'bricks and mortar' housing was provided they would live in housing (no one expressed a desire to remain on unauthorised developments or encampments).



The 'Essex-Wide Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment' was commissioned by the Essex Planning Officers Association, chaired by Bill Newman, Corporate Director Sustainable Communities, Thurrock Council. If you are interested in obtaining a copy of this report please contact:

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