

**Feedback relating to Gypsy and Traveller provision at Cranbrook prepared by Planning Policy, East Devon District Council****Summary**

- **At least two sites should be provided at Cranbrook, with optimum site sizes being 6-10 pitches each.**
- **The Eastern site should expand to include the whole field, not a small part of it. This would allow space for Gypsy pitches to the west of the site and New Travellers to the east with land for small livestock and future pitch expansion if required. This could also allow room for overnight visitors (known to residents, eg family and friends) if required.**
- **Family Groups should be able to move to adjacent plots when the sites are first established and there should be room for family expansion within some plots.**
- **Pitches should be laid out according to user preference (eg majority hardstanding for travelling Gypsies who want low-maintenance; minimal hardstanding for Travellers who wish to grow vegetables, keep animals etc). All plots should include day rooms, as well as shower/toilet and cooking facilities, if users require them. Local authority sites should include an office/community space for meetings and residents use.**
- **Respondents generally stated they would prefer to rent mobile homes (provided as part of their pitch) and have space for their own touring caravans and vehicles. This will ensure that mobile homes are consistently well-maintained and are well insulated with working utilities.**
- **The site should be managed by a body with specialist knowledge- either the local authority or a registered social landlord so that rent and utility costs are collected weekly and any profit reinvested in future maintenance.**
- **A transit site should NOT be provided as part of either of the two proposed sites, it should be provided further away from Cranbrook and separated from housing and permanent pitches.**

**How the information was collected**

Interviews were carried out with members of the Gypsy and Traveller communities of Teignbridge, East Devon and Exeter by a Senior Planning Officer at East Devon District Council and a Gypsy Liaison Officer at Devon County Council. In total around 60 people were verbally invited to give their views and/or complete a questionnaire. The interviews were informal discussions which centred on the existing lifestyles of participants, their opinions on the Cranbrook Plan proposals, the optimum size and location of potential sites and what facilities should be provided for residents and visitors. The questionnaire was structured similarly and addressed the same issues.

50 additional questionnaires, with pre-paid envelopes, were distributed to participants so that they could consult their wider friends and family. The Gypsy Liaison Officer was due to collect these from residents (and assist with completion if necessary) but, due to circumstances beyond her control, was unable to do this during the consultation period, so only 11 of these questionnaires had been returned at the time of writing this report. If further responses are received, and their content differs significantly from those already collated, a further report will be produced.

The need for new pitches and management of new sites was also discussed with a local social housing provider experienced in managing Gypsy and Traveller sites in the south-west, and Devon County Council who currently manage two sites close to Cranbrook.

Due to the very small numbers of Gypsies and Travellers in the area it might be possible to identify individual respondents from their comments, so consultation was undertaken on the basis that responses would be kept confidential and that recurring themes would be summarised. The following summary is derived from the consultation:

### **General Management Observations**

Gypsy and Traveller sites are generally self-funding, although 10-12 pitches are the minimum usually needed to produce a profit (which most local authorities then use to replace outdated mobile-homes and facilities). As with the settled community, residents are usually a mixture of self-funding and housing benefit recipients although most are on low incomes and unable to fund the purchase of their own pitches (or habitable caravans to put on them). Housing providers agreed that arrears are unusual and most tenants pay their utility bills and pitch rent weekly to avoid 'falling behind'. Anti-social behaviour is not considered to be a major issue on permanent sites with reported instances being similar to those in the settled community.

Transit pitches are not widely used elsewhere in the south west (some have been turned into permanent pitches due to lack of use). Most anti-social behaviour is associated with transit sites rather than permanent ones (in particular fittings are vandalised and rubbish/commercial waste is left behind). If transit pitches are provided, users should be asked to sign a contract when they move on and eviction action should be taken if they overstay. Toilets, showers, bins and a hardstanding should be provided but, as these may be vandalised, they should be chosen for durability rather than aesthetics. CCTV and an on-site Manager can reduce instances of crime on transit sites.

Most residents would prefer to have mobile homes and utility blocks provided for them to rent as the housing provider would then replace/update them periodically (at present some homes are damp, unventilated and uninsulated). Residents need day-rooms as mobile homes have very limited, shared, social space which limits family life.

Sites with an office/meeting room are preferable as the building (usually a mobile home or portacabin) can provide an office for site management as well as a meeting room for residents. Elsewhere, experience has shown that residents with their own day-rooms tend not to hire the meeting room frequently but the room has been used very regularly by different agencies offering support to residents, including Health Visitors, benefits advice, small-business legislation etc.

Existing residents have raised concerns about fire safety and the accessibility of sites to fire engines/ambulances. On a new site this should be factored in from the outset.

### **Cranbrook**

The need for new pitches in East Devon was universally supported as was the principle of pitches at Cranbrook. Everyone agreed that **at least two sites** should be provided and it would be better to separate Gypsies and New Travellers if possible due to their differing needs and lifestyles. If they are provided for on the same site, then they should be separately grouped so that their pitches can be appropriately maintained but with shared social facilities.

Most new pitches are needed due to:

- Overcrowding (6-8 people in a touring caravan in some instances);
- Very poor condition of accommodation;
- Unsuitable accommodation (due to lack of heating/sanitation or disabled adaptation);
- Lack of an authorised site (so living road-side without any facilities, in some cases with disabled children and chronically ill elderly)

Optimum site size was considered by residents to be **6-10 well-spaced pitches** with room for future-expansion if families required it later on. The importance of family ties was stressed by many Gypsy respondents and several asked if extended family groups could move together (requiring 3-4 pitches) so that they could continue to offer health care and social support. Family proximity was often cited as more important than facilities, condition of accommodation or crowding.

Several families stated that their children's physical and mental health were being badly affected by living 'roadside' particularly where families have been repeatedly evicted without being offered pitches to move to. Even where pitches have been found, a lack of greenspace or anywhere to walk or play (eg as at Sowton, where sites are entirely concreted and located on an industrial estate adjacent to main roads) has led to the children leading a sedentary life and impacts on mental health from noise disturbance and industrial activity. The sites at Cranbrook are considered by these families to be an opportunity to provide a healthier lifestyle and a chance for their children to obtain an education and healthcare which they can't otherwise access. One family has been driving over 500 miles per week to ensure their children are able to consistently attend primary school, rather than changing schools each time the family are moved on- Cranbrook would provide education within walking distance and the location of both sites are supported on this basis.

All except one respondent stated that they would prefer to purchase a private site but funds and lack of sites precluded this. The opportunity to live on a new site, laid out with their family needs in mind, was generally welcomed although it was noted that younger respondents were much more positive about the possibility.

New travellers were concerned that **their lifestyles could not be facilitated in the small site areas currently allocated due to a lack of space for gardens and small livestock**. They asked if the whole field, which the eastern site is part of, could be allocated for Gypsy and Traveller use and, if Travellers were located to the eastern end, this would provide space for grazing, future expansion land and also land for their overnight visitors (some of whom use horse-drawn wagons).

Most respondents felt that disabled adaptations would be useful, with a significant number of those interviewed having at least one immediate family member with a serious disability or life-limiting illness. Where respondents mentioned that they no longer travelled regularly, this was almost always due to their own health needs or the need to care for a disabled relative. Additional space for washing machines/drying space and bathing space (as opposed to showers) may also be required for some families where disability requires additional laundering and personal care.

Of those respondents who would **not** consider a pitch at Cranbrook themselves, the reasons given were:

- The age and health needs of respondents ('too old to move'; 'I can't leave because I am a carer for my child/neighbour/other family member')
- Existing site, although substandard in terms of accommodation and facilities, offers security of tenancy. Scared that giving this up could lead to homelessness in the future
- Worried that families would be separated
- Hostility from the settled community
- Pitches too 'crammed' in the draft Cranbrook Plan. The Station Road site, in particular is 'hemmed in' and overlooked by housing.

## **Detailed site design and layout issues**

### Boundary treatment

Dense boundary hedges would reduce the visual impact of the sites and reduce noise from adjoining roads. These should be lined with a secure fence to prevent animals and children wandering and prevent unauthorised access.

### Landscaping and surfacing

Generally Gypsies suggested they would prefer **hard-surfacing throughout their plots** and minimal, and low, slow growing, landscaping as a travelling lifestyle makes it difficult to maintain vegetation over the summer. Similarly, trees should not be in close proximity to caravans as the leaves collect on the roofs and are hard to clear without specialist equipment, leading to penetrating damp problems and staining.

Most Travellers were very positive about **minimising hard surfacing on their plots** (using it only for vehicle hardstandings and paths) and planting/grassing the remainder. They agreed that tree leaves are an issue and it was suggested that peripheral tree planting and perhaps a communal orchard would reduce the issue whilst retaining trees on-site.

### Permanent Buildings

All the Gypsies interviewed stated that they would use a **dayroom** as well as a **kitchen/utility** area and a **shower-room** (although one family said they would like the option of a bath instead of a shower). Potential uses for a dayroom included quiet homework space for children, a safe area to play, for recuperation after illness and to accommodate visitors overnight.

Travellers expressed less interest in a dayroom, prioritising outside space, but most said they would use one if it were provided.

Most respondents would like **renewable energy**, although their reasons were split between cost-saving and environmental benefit.

All respondents were keen to be **metered for utility usage** with most preferring an option to pay a site-manager weekly (as DCC currently allow on their sites). It was stressed that the rate charged for utilities should be fair, as experience on a private site was that the owner charged ambiguous and excessive amounts leading to hardship and inability to afford heating.

### Safety

The **need for sites to be safe** for residents came up repeatedly. Suggestions to improve safety included good site management (so that causes of physical danger could be dealt with promptly), CCTV, restricted access to non-residents and security fencing (screened by hedging). Access barriers were not considered a good investment as they restrict access to delivery vehicles and are fiddly to operate by residents.

Most respondents **were keen to be integrated with the local community and share facilities and services**, although an edge-of-settlement location (rather than being surrounded by houses) was considered most likely to facilitate this.

### Community Space

Respondents were positive about the benefits of communal space, prioritising a **community meeting room** over other types of community space, so a community meeting room should be provided to act as an office for a manager, space for professionals to offer advice and services and, possibly, for private functions.

**Children's play space** was seen as a high priority but it needs to be located centrally and clearly available to all. There have been instances elsewhere where adjoining residents, especially those with several related, family groups on a site, have appropriated public play space and intimidated

other users so that it effectively became a private space used by their family only as an extension to their pitch.

Other types of community space eg shared food growing areas, grazing space, visitor parking or overnight spaces, were supported where respondents had a personal need for such spaces. Other respondents were ambivalent.

### Workspace

Most respondents didn't have specific on-site workspace requirements, although some stated that Cranbrook is a location which would be convenient to access their existing jobs. Of those who did require workspace, it was to accommodate work vehicles, small workshops (eg double garage sized) or skips for waste materials (building rubble and tree prunings/green waste).

### **Transit Pitch Provision**

No respondents wanted transit provision as part of a new site. Overwhelmingly this was because

- Family and friends will stay as guests on permanent sites, transit site will be used by unknown people (who could otherwise stay in holiday parks if they are 'on holiday')
- Fear of short-term 'strangers' and the impact of their behaviour on adjacent settled, permanent residents (on permanent pitches and the wider community)
- Concern that anti-social behaviour will be blamed on permanent residents
- Fly-tipping etc associated with transient 'businesses' who work door-to-door and won't pay to use recycling centres

There is considered to be a need for transit sites (and this is evidenced by the current unauthorised road-side stops which are ongoing in the Cranbrook area), however respondents very strongly consider that such a site should be located away from housing or permanent pitches. Security and surveillance to prevent anti-social behaviour are seen as essential, and fittings should be robust and minimal due to the possibility of vandalism.