

THE LOCAL CONTEXT

PREAMBLE

The Traveller population of Britain comprises a number of culturally distinct groups: English, Welsh and Scottish Gypsies, Irish Travellers and New Travellers and members of all these groups can, on occasion, be found living in Herefordshire. For the main part, however, the local population is predominately an English Gypsy and New Traveller one, and its exact size is hard to estimate, as it is partially nomadic.

The situation is further complicated because there are many families currently living in housing or permanently settled on sites who no longer travel at all, or only travel occasionally, also identify themselves as Gypsies having been born into a distinct racial group with its own history and culture. Many families in the past have moved into housing only to move out again later. The Gypsy community currently forms the county's largest ethnic minority and has been part of our shared history since the 16th century. Their long established presence is reflected in or local place names e.g. Tinkers Corner, Romany Way etc. and the vestiges of the international language of the Gypsy people - Romany are still in use today.

The County's farms have traditionally required a seasonal workforce and this is still a reason why some sections of the community chose to pursue a nomadic lifestyle. Most of Herefordshire's Gypsy families travel predominately within the County boundary, but there is a small and generally more affluent group who travel in pursuit of work throughout Britain and the Continent. Travellers often turn their hands to a variety of jobs, e.g. land work, tarmac laying, barn painting, tree surgery, scrap collection, carpet selling, holly and mistletoe gathering, antique dealing etc.

New Travellers have their origins in the settled community but have chosen to become modern nomads for a variety of reasons. The majority of horse drawn caravans one sees on the County's roads were originally owned by Gypsies but are now in the possession of New Travellers. Their population locally has increased steadily since the 1960's and their children are attending local schools in growing numbers.

No Gypsy or Traveller can be excluded from a site by virtue of race but the site at Croft Lane in Luston is predominantly occupied by New Age Traveller and the Council particularly welcomes New Age travelers to apply for pitches on this site.

Despite the complexities of the Traveller population, people still frequently make reference to 'real Gypsies' out of a lack of understanding of the history of the various groups that make up the Traveller community and without appreciating that their culture like ours is in a continuous process of change.

Over the centuries many groups - tinkers, pedlars, drovers, circuses, migrant works, merchants, Gypsies, showmen etc. have travelled the highways of the county for a variety of reasons and inevitably intermarriage and cultural exchange has taken place not only between the various groups but between the various groups and the settle community.

Local Travellers have access to the services of The Herefordshire Travellers' Support Group which operates a children play scheme, the Travellers' Health Project which visits local sites, the West Midlands Consortium Education Service for Travelling Children which assists the county's school in serving the needs for Traveller children.

Under the terms of the 1968 Caravan Site Act, which has since been repealed, the local authority had a duty to provide sites for Travellers residing in or resorting to the county and a number of sites were built, but this issue of sufficient appropriate accommodation for a numerically fluctuating and diverse community remains an ongoing challenge, which has to be met if its members are to continue to enjoy the benefits of proper health care and education to which they are entitled and which are enshrined in Human Rights legislation.

BACKGROUND TO SITE PROVISION

The County of Hereford currently has 7 Local Authority run sites as follows: -

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| Romany Close, Grafton, Hereford | 9 pitches (permanent) |
| Croft Lane, Luston, Leominster | 10 pitches (permanent) |
| Open Fields, Linton, Bromyard | 14 pitches (permanent) |
| Watery Lane, Lower Bullingham, Hereford | 11 pitches (permanent) |
| Tinkers Corner, Near Bosbury | 7 pitches (permanent) |
| Turnpike, near Pembridge/Shobdon | 6 pitches (permanent) |
| Stoney Street, Madley | 17 pitches (Transit/Emergency/Stopping) |

The three significant dates in the history of site provision are:

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| 1 st April 1970 | The 1968 Caravan Sites Act became law requiring Local Authorities to provide 'accommodation for Gypsies residing in or resorting to' their area |
| December 1979 | Local Government Land Act providing 100% Exchequer Grants to pay for site provision |
| 1994 | Criminal Justice and Public Order Act repealed the 1968 Act duty and the grants |

The first site in the area was produced by the former Bromsgrove Rural District Council at Wythall in 1968. Further sites followed in 1974/5 at Hipton Hill, Evesham and Pinvin, Pershore started by the Worcestershire County Council and finished by the Hereford and Worcester Council.

Two sites were opened in Herefordshire in the first week of November 1988 (Turnpike and Watery Lane). Sites followed at Grafton (1992), Luston (1996), Madley (1995), Bosbury (1997) and Bromyard (1998).

Although following the repeal of the Government grants, as these sites were already in the pipeline, 100% government funding was secured.

No further local authority sites have been built since the formation of the Herefordshire Council but further sites are actively being sought.

The transition of the English (and Welsh) Gypsy population from a state of semi-nomadism to the more settled condition provided by sites was not without difficulties. However, there have been many examples of very successful sites operating for varying periods.

So far, however, there has not been much success in meeting the need for temporary stopping places with basic facilities for groups of Travellers passing through the County. When they have been obliged to camp illegally there has sometimes been annoyance caused to the settled population around them and disturbance to local Travellers with whom they compete for sites.

Some successful permanent sites have operated for many years where casual encampments have been left undisturbed and gained acceptance - even rights of occupation. They do not all have planning permission but have been treated by the local authority as "tolerated" sites.

Privately owned and managed sites are much prized by those Gypsies that can afford them and are able to get planning permission. There are around 20 such sites in the county of varying sizes but in the main provide 1 to 2 caravan pitches per plot.

An inherent difficulty confronting Travellers on council provided permanent residential sites is that they have not chosen their neighbours. The close proximity of the Pitches precludes the families resolving any disputes in the traditional way - by separating themselves off. If they leave they many find they have forfeited their place and cannot get back.

There is currently no government subsidy for the running of a Traveller Service and attempts to fund it through rents from sites has meant that the service has been underfunded and not flexible enough to copy with the difficulties caused between residents.

The consequences of this policy have been that there has been a move out of Council sites by the Gypsy population - the more well to do finding small pieces of ground to set up family sites and those unable to do that applying for, and securing, social housing.

In addition, the movement into housing, although it has been remarkably smooth in most cases, may be a temporary phenomenon.

The Council is now to decide the future of its sites. The policy that follows will need to focus on a Community Development challenge; how to accommodate a distinctive minority, with respect for its varied traditions and wishes and in accordance with Human Rights legislation (which would seem to prohibit the exclusion of certain groups per se) and taking account of the responsibilities imposed by S.71 of the Race Relations Act (as amended) to work positively to secure good race relations and to minimise friction with the majority and will compliment the Councils Comprehensive Equality Policy, which sets out how the council should be working to eliminate all unlawful discrimination and is committed to promoting equality of opportunity and, good community relations.

For while the Traveller population has too often been seen in terms of 'a problem', there is no doubt that its contribution to the economy and distinctiveness as well as the cultural diversity of Herefordshire has been very great. In an age of increasing conformity and uniformity, the existence of alternative traditions and cultures that resist these overwhelming pressures becomes consequently more important to us all.

Herefordshire is fortunate in having a range of services for Travellers which is probably as extensive and experienced as anywhere in the country. The Unitary Authority allows the dovetailing of major services under one provider and the Police boundaries coincide with those of the Local Authorities.