

Gypsies, Travellers and Government plans

The Government plans to bring in two new Bills later this year or early next year. They are:

- the Planning Reform Bill and
- the Housing and Regeneration Bill.

The Planning Reform Bill will simplify some parts of planning law. It aims to make planning authorities better at carrying out the tasks they are supposed to perform. Really big projects like airports and motorways will be taken out of the normal local and regional planning system and given their own national system.

The Housing and Regeneration Bill will merge the Housing Corporation (which gives out money to housing associations so they can build low-cost housing) and English Partnerships (which plans house-building in growth areas like Milton Keynes, Ashford and Cambridgeshire). The aim is to build many more houses, especially lower-cost houses, in the next few years, because there are not enough for everyone who needs one. The Government also says it will use this Bill to bring in security of tenure on publicly-owned Gypsy and Traveller sites.

When these Bills are debated in Parliament there will be a chance for MPs and Peers who are friendly to Gypsies and Travellers to try to make changes which would help them.

These Bills could be used to tackle some of the problems which have arisen in putting into practice the Housing Act 2004 and ODPM Circular 01/2006. It was these that gave local authorities a duty to carry out Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessments and make sure that land is set aside for Gypsy and Traveller sites in their areas. But many local authorities are taking a very long time to do these assessments or are doing them badly so they will not have to provide land for sites. Where local authorities do suggest places where Gypsies and Travellers could live, there is often strong opposition from local settled people. Where land is set aside for Gypsy and Traveller sites, the fact that it has planning permission for a site may make it too expensive for most Gypsies and Travellers to buy.

We think that we should get MPs and Peers to try to make sure that these new Bills include the following points. If the Bills do not include them, MPs and Peers can suggest changes (amendments) to them while they are being debated in Parliament.

1 Housing and Regeneration Bill

Local authorities should once more be given a 'statutory duty' to provide sites or make sure that someone else provides them. If local authorities have to do this it might help overcome opposition from local residents.

The Government wants to increase the amount of 'social housing' through this Bill. The Bill should make clear that 'social housing' includes Gypsy and Traveller sites. Housing Associations and the new homes agency must do much more to provide sites as well as houses and flats.

1.1 Government funding

The Housing Corporation – or whatever it is replaced with – must make money available especially for Gypsy and Traveller site provision (this kind of special funding is often called ‘ringfenced’ or ‘hypothecated’ funding).

The Government plans to give money to councils to provide social housing, but only if councils are working with ‘Arms Length Management Organisations’ or similar organisations. Providing a pitch costs less than half the cost of an average house. Government should give money to local councils so that they can directly provide and run sites.

1.2 Affordable housing targets

The Bill will create a new body called the Homes and Communities Agency to make sure that homes are provided for people who need them. The Homes and Communities Agency must make sure it meets the need of Gypsies and Travellers for sites.

The Homes and Communities Agency will aim to provide affordable housing, ‘mixed communities’ with people from all sorts of different backgrounds, and Eco Towns (which will not have a bad impact on the environment). It should include Gypsy and Traveller sites in these aims.

The Homes and Communities Agency will also help develop Community Land Trusts. These will help a community to get together to buy land or houses together. Individuals and families then pay rent to the Trust and the Trust uses this to pay off the mortgage on the land or houses. Community Land Trusts could be used as a way of providing Gypsy and Traveller sites and this must be made clear in the Bill.

The Government has set aside some areas as ‘Growth Points’ where many more houses are to be built. These Growth Points should also provide more sites as part of their targets for home building.

The Government wants 70,000 more ‘affordable homes’ (for sale) and 45,000 more ‘social homes’ (for low rent) built by 2010-11. The goal is to build 50,000 new social rented homes every year after that. The Government must make clear that Gypsy and Traveller sites are included in these targets along with houses and flats.

1.3 Planning Gain Supplement and Section 106 agreements

The Government is proposing a tax on house builders, called Planning Gain Supplement. This is because house-builders often make very big profits from new developments, but those developments create new needs for roads and schools and hospitals which then have to be provided at public expense. Planning Gain Supplement would help cover some of those costs. If the Government does introduce it, it should make clear that some of the money should be put towards site provision.

At the moment, local councils can make big housing developers sign Section 106 agreements, which mean that before getting permission to build, a company has to agree to provide low-cost homes as well as more expensive ones. Section 106 agreements might be replaced with Planning Gain Supplement, but if it is not, the Government should

make clear that Section 106 agreements should be used to make developers provide Gypsy and Traveller sites.

1.4 Use of surplus public land

The Homes and Communities Agency will look for land owned by councils or government departments which could be used for housing. Developers building on this land will have to make sure that half the homes they build are low-cost homes for sale or rent. The Homes and Communities Agency must make sure that Gypsy and Traveller sites are included in this exercise.

1.5 Local housing companies

Local housing companies will be set up to build houses. They should also be given responsibility to provide some Gypsy and Traveller sites.

1.6 Brownfield sites

60% of new homes are supposed to be built on 'brownfield' sites, that is places which have been previously developed. The Homes and Communities Agency should make sure that good quality Gypsy and Traveller sites are also built on this kind of land.

1.7 The work of the Homes and Communities Agency

The new agency, the Homes and Communities Agency, should be responsible for making sure that enough Gypsy and Traveller sites are provided around England. It should have a Gypsy and Traveller Unit in it, just like Communities and Local Government has.

1.8 Penalties against local councils

It might be possible to include in the Bill a punishment for local councils who do not provide enough new pitches: Government funding for low-cost housing could be refused unless the council agrees to provide sites as well as houses.

1.9 Mortgages

The Government wants to make sure that there are more low-cost fixed-rate mortgages for people who need them. Gypsies and Travellers must be able to get hold of these for funding for sites and land for self-build schemes.

1.10 Helping first-time buyers

The Government wants to help people to buy their first home by creating more shared-ownership schemes and enabling tenants in social housing to buy a share in their home. These ideas could be extended to Gypsy and Traveller sites too.

1.11 Making sure it happens

The Prime Minister has a 'Delivery Unit' to try to make sure that different government departments work together to carry out the Government's plans. The Delivery Unit is working to make sure that the plan for building more homes is carried out. It should also help make sure that enough sites are built.

1.12 Local action

Local councils sometimes work together through 'Local Delivery Vehicles' to make sure that houses are built in their areas. LDVs might be able to help make sure sites are provided in local areas too.

1.13 Apprenticeships

The Government wants more apprenticeships and other training in the construction industry. This training should be flexible enough to meet the needs of Gypsies and Travellers who would like to take part in it.

1.14 Unheard voices

The Government is asking local councils to listen to the 'unheard voices' of young people wanting to move into their first home and not just to people who already own a house and want to stop more houses being built. Gypsies' and Travellers' voices are also often unheard, and local councils need to listen to them too.

2 Planning Reform Bill

The Government has been trying to get local councils to provide more sites by promising that if they do they can have extra powers to evict people on unauthorised sites. It should take a different approach.

The Planning Reform Bill will mean that some planning applications are considered at national level rather than local level. The Bill could include mention of a national network of transit sites – this might mean that transit site construction could not be blocked by local opposition.

The Bill also aims to improve the way the planning system works so that land is actually made available for new homes. Under laws already in place, if local councils do not do a good job, national government departments can get involved and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will be able to tell local councils what they have to do and when. Gypsy and Traveller site provision needs to be one of the targets that local councils have to meet.

3 Other matters

In 2003 the Government announced a Building for Life Standard to encourage good design for houses and flats. It should also include design of Gypsy and Traveller sites.

The Government also has a Decent Homes Programme to make sure that by the end of 2010 95% of all public housing is of a decent standard. It should do the same for publicly run Gypsy and Traveller sites and provide the money to bring them up to standard.

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