

Leeds GATE Gypsy and Traveller Exchange

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Charitable status registration number

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Can we guess perhaps the images that come to mind knowing you were going to hear a deputation regarding Gypsies and Travellers? Are you bored already expecting to hear about the Race Relations Amendment Act or the Human Rights Act? Are you expecting apologists for bad behaviour? Well you aren't going to get any of that. What you are going to get is a solution.

We are here, not because of acts of parliament, but because of the reality that affects people's daily lives. On a regular basis Leeds residents and electors are denied access to places of work and leisure by the presence of unauthorised encampments. The Local Authority, local business and the police annually spend vast sums of money moving the problem from one doorstep to another, leaving totally unresolved issues of fly tipping, anti social behaviour, desperate poor health, poor education and causing increasing race hatred between communities.

Councillors are doubtless aware that 'Harmonious Communities' is a key theme at the moment. Gypsy people have been in and around Leeds since the 1500's, Irish Travellers built parts of this city and subsequent generations remain here today. There are many more Gypsy and Traveller people living in Leeds than just those who live on the roadsides. They aren't going anywhere; this town is their home. And yet we don't accept the 'Gypsy problem' as being 'our problem', and we certainly don't accept Gypsy and Irish Traveller people as being 'ours'. Despite being aware of living in a global world and accepting that we are all connected to one another, we push this problem around as if it will somehow disappear regardless of the consequences for constituents and neighbours. We go so far as to pay for a Gypsy/Travellers Service Department to manage the problem, like some sort of pest control, but don't enable it to get on with the work that would solve the problem? Is there any other group of Leeds residents, constituents and potential voters that we view in this way? Is there any other problem where we resolutely refuse to accept the solution, preferring instead to put up with endless vast expense?

We told you early on that we brought with us the solution. And you already know what it is; our own Local Authority scrutiny enquiry has repeatedly identified the need for further sites within Leeds. So if we know what the solution is, why do we not take action? A vocal number of local people don't want sites in their area. Why not? Because when they think of Gypsies or Irish Travellers they remember the last photograph in the Yorkshire Evening Post of their local councillor standing next to piles of rubbish demanding 'tougher powers' to move the problem? Or perhaps they think of the sprawling 41 pitch Cottingley Springs and imagine something of that size, along with no extra public services, landing in the field next door? Perhaps it's images of frightening strange men in transit vans, or the injustice of council tax being spent on providing luxury for people who apparently don't pay rent, tax, council tax, and water rates?

We're not going to start quoting acts of parliament but perhaps we can remind you of the obligations, threats and opportunities presented by the new planning system, particularly the new Local Development Framework.

The obligation contained within it in regard to Gypsies and Travellers is that the local authority must carry out detailed assessment of accommodation need among Gypsies and Travellers within its districts; indeed it must go further than just assessing need. It must provide details, ultimately as specific as postcodes, as to which actual pieces of ground can be used, either by the council or another party, to address that accommodation need. We've known for over a year that these obligations were upon us and nationally many are under way. Here in Leeds however we have not made a start, tying ourselves up in arguments about whether it should be done locally or sub-regionally. It's as though a site being built in Kirklees or Halifax where there are currently none would put an end to encampments here. Let us assure you it would not.

The threat, which this presents, is the possibility that if it is not done, or not done properly, a planning inspector can reject any and all other plans.

The opportunities? We can, if we work together, put a final end to the running sore of unauthorised encampments in unsuitable places which cost the local economy well rehearsed thousands of pounds every year without providing any sort of solution. This despite there being 100% grants available from national government, so the solution would potentially cost virtually nothing.

Gypsies and Irish Travellers in Leeds suffer a life expectancy of 50 years of age, their children are among the worst educated and experience tells them there is nothing to gain in being polite to neighbours whose only wish is to see them gone. We can change this.

The obligations are yours. What we came here to do today is to say that we can help. Leeds Gypsy and Traveller Exchange is a nationally respected organisation with a reputation for positive pragmatism. We can help you to have the conversation with your local electorate that leads to happy, harmonious communities living alongside one another with security and respect. We can open the door to dialogue with a wide range of travelling people who want also to live in harmony with their neighbours. We can help you to address the issues of sanitation and rubbish which so upset your constituents. We can show you that Gypsy and Irish Traveller people are already a part of 'our' society, making a steady contribution to our local economy and culture.

It is time to open the door to Gypsy and Irish Traveller people to be part not just of society but also of our 'harmonious community'. We can help. But it is up to elected members to give the lead, without which we remain on the same old expensive treadmill and risk the regeneration plans which will benefit all Leeds residents.