

**NOTES OF A MEETING OF SOUTH HAMS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP
HELD AT FOLLATON HOUSE ON FRIDAY 6 NOVEMBER 2009**

'TRAVELLING COMMUNITIES'

PRESENT:

Vaughan Lindsay – Dartington Hall Trust (SHSP Chair)
Alan Robinson – South Hams District Council (SHDC)
Supt Sarah Sharpe – Devon & Cornwall Constabulary
Cllr Roger Croad – Devon County Council (DCC)
Cllr Anne Ward – SHDC
Lesley Hughes – Ivybridge Town Council
Jill Davies – South Hams Community and Voluntary Services
Tina Henry – NHS Devon
Howard Toplis – Tor Homes
Cllr Tony Mead – Totnes Town Council (for Cllr Tony Whitty)
Phil Markham – Devon National Park Authority
Linda Shilan – South Hams Citizens Advice Bureau (for Emma Handley)
Ian Hosking – SHDC
Peter Dale – SHDC
Amanda Harvey – SHDC
Jo Doney – SHDC (note taker)

Apologies:

Peter Tansey – Business representative
Cllr John Tucker – SHDC (SHSP Vice Chair)
Kate Cantwell - DCC
Sabrina Thomas (for Kate Cantwell) – DCC
Cllr Michael Saltern – SHDC
Paul Sadler – Environment Agency

1. Short Film – 'Pride and Prejudice'

Lizzy Issacs, a member of a Romany Community, informed the partnership that children from travelling communities experienced a lot of prejudice at school to the extent that many of them did not complete their schooling because they did not feel safe and, therefore, did not receive a full education.

To address this a meeting had been held with Devon Racial Equality Council (Devon REC) to tackle these issues and one of the outcomes was the action to produce the film. It had taken thirteen months to produce and had been made by a group of Romany women. The film, launched in September 2008 was particularly used to educate children about the Romany culture and to help breakdown the negative 'stereotypes' that persisted.

The film highlighted:

- That Romany Gypsies did not choose their culture, they were born into it and that they were carrying on a traditional way of life that had existed for their families for hundreds of years;
- That they were a minority group in a multi-cultural society, but that racial incidents against gypsies were not regarded in the same light as racial incidents against black or Asians and discrimination was widespread;
- That travelling communities had been losing a substantial amount of traditional lawful 'stopping paces' e.g. to housing developments and this had led them to resort to stopping 'illegally' in places such as car parks and wastelands from where they were usually evicted;
- That children from travelling communities frequently suffered bullying and did not complete their education.

2. Issues faced by the police with regards to travelling communities:

At the end of the film, Supt Sharpe thanked Lizzy for the film stating that it had challenged prejudices. She went further to state that the reason she had requested the extra meeting was the result of issues that had been faced by the police in the South Hams during the summer with regards to travelling communities. She proposed that the Partnership took a lead on progressing these issues and in taking them forward as it required a multi-agency approach.

She further advised that during the summer, some 3,000 people were moving across the county in travelling communities and that there were few lawful 'stopping areas' for the police to direct them to once they had been evicted from illegal 'stopping places'.

The Superintendent reminded partners that all Irish Travellers and Gypsies were a protected group as stipulated in the Race Relations Act and to be mindful of making any comments that could be deemed as prejudiced or inciting racial hatred.

She stated that the position of 'The Association of Chief Police Officers' (ACPO) was that although legislation allowed eviction in certain circumstances, this would be used at their discretion and the police would not now continually displace communities, unless there were extreme circumstances such as a very detrimental impact on a neighbouring community. The onus would now be on landowners to obtain civil injunctions and the police would attend in a capacity to ensure public order e.g. escorting bailiffs, and they would also attend to ensure travellers had access to services.

In terms of crime, the Superintendent informed that they did not see 'spikes' in crime in relation to travellers, and that any increases were proportionate to crime levels associated with the population of the settled community.

The Devon REC had undertaken training with the police and some local authorities in the past year in regard to travellers, but there were still agencies who were not utilising the training opportunities.

When the Partnership meeting had first been requested, the issues with the travellers at Ivybridge were still current. There had been some errors in communication with regard to serving injunctions, for which the Superintendent apologised and she advised that as a result their internal processes had been reviewed. Now, however, discussions could move at a slower pace as many travellers would be returning to their winter habitats but there was still the possibility that problems could re-emerge before the spring.

The challenge now was to identify sites for long term provision for travelling communities that would not heighten tensions with the settled community, that enabled travellers to have access to services such as health and education, and that meant travellers were not reduced to trespassing unlawfully creating tensions with landowners and neighbouring communities.

3. Position of South Hams District Council:

The Strategic Director (Community) stated that these were issues that agencies and communities could not shy away from. The Council had adopted a Social Inclusion Policy and had also agreed to a Devon led protocol on how travellers would be dealt with, and it had been one of the few authorities to sign up to it.

The protocol in general terms suggested that where no nuisance was being caused, gypsies and travellers would generally be tolerated in the context of the lack of authorised sites, and as an example, he highlighted the number of unauthorised New Age Traveller sites in and around Totnes where action had not been taken. The aim of the protocol was to allow travellers and settled communities to live side by side.

The Council had also aimed to improve awareness across the organisation by undertaking training for Members and staff which had been provided by Devon Race Equality Council. There had also been member training with regard to planning matters. The Council had set up a range of liaison arrangements, including the visit to a site as soon as there was an alert to the location of travellers. This would be to organise the issue of waste facilities etc. Penny Dane of Devon REC had, over a period of several years, been supporting our engagement with travellers to enhance dialogue.

The use of unauthorised sites was sensitive, particularly on private land, as planning authority enforcement action could take six to eighteen months to progress. It was therefore quicker for the landowners to deal with these matters. He stated that DCC may have more land close to the A38 and other major roads at their disposal for the provision of both permanent and transit sites, than the District Council. However, identifying sites would be very challenging and as it had proved difficult to find suitable sites for affordable housing. Even so, from January 2010 the Council would be working on a Gypsy and Traveller Site Allocation document. This was likely to involve over twelve months of engagement with partners to identify sites that would suit both Travellers and Settled Communities and the Council anticipated some challenging discussions. It was hoped this document would be available for formal consultation in June 2011.

There were no current formal targets, as the Regional Spatial Strategy had been held in abeyance pending legal action. The published targets had been for 51 permanent sites and 5 transit sites in the South Hams. The provision of 5 transit sites would be hard to manage and would require a critical mass of usage to make it viable. The transit sites would need to be close to road links, whereas permanent sites would need to be situated with access to schools, shops and healthcare i.e. in closer proximity to the settled community. This would require a mature dialogue with a wide range of partners, agencies and the public.

Also, in relation to the Development Management Policies, there were now published criteria against which to assess applications submitted by Travellers.

4. Plenary Session:

The Chairman thanked Supt Sharpe for calling the Partnership to action and invited debate on the matters raised.

Training/Reducing Prejudice:

Superintendent Sharpe emphasised that there must be a focus on challenging prejudice and the Chairman agreed that all Partners had a responsibility to do this. Increased training would be critical to enhancing awareness and improving tolerance.

Waste:

It was discussed that the issue of waste was a great source of contention with the settled community. An Executive Member of DCC stated that Romany Gypsy sites were typically not a problem for the authorities, but emphasised that the settled community would not tolerate the problems recently experienced with a non Romany travelling community. Waste was also one of key issues that was highlighted by the media and which perpetuated negative stereotypes. The Street Scene Manager (SHDC) stated that portaloos and waste bins were provided as soon as they were alerted to the presence of a community, however these were often unused and they frequently found large quantities of commercial waste such as roofing and paving dumped in fields which presented a cost to the tax payer.

In response, Lizzy Issacs stated that she equally disapproved of this behaviour but wanted to emphasise that where travelling communities had not presented a problem, this was not highlighted in the media and that communities either received no publicity or 100% negative publicity which contributed to the perpetuation of the stereotypes. It was further pointed out by a representative that problems with waste dumping and fly tipping occurred in the settled community.

Location of Sites:

With regard to long term permanent sites, Lizzy Issacs emphasised the need to find sites that were fit for human habitation, i.e. not sited next to waste tips for example. She went further to say that if travellers were sited in sub standard locations, then sub standard behaviour could be a consequence, and that travellers must not be regarded as inferior citizens to those of the settled community. She also highlighted that when travellers did submit planning applications there was often fierce opposition.

The DNPA representative noted that there was a site at Marley Head in close proximity to the A38 which might be proposed as a suitable transit site for travellers.

The Lead DCC Member representative also expressed to partners that if they could identify any suitable DCC land, he would personally expend all efforts to progress those sites. It was acknowledged that this personal pledge by the Lead Member would be of huge assistance.

It was suggested that management companies could be appointed to oversee the sites, such as housing associations and act as a point of contact to reassure the public.

A representative suggested that Traditional 'Core' Traveller 'routes' be considered when identifying sites as there could otherwise be a risk that sites would not be utilised.

It was proposed that an action for the Partnership could be to map out potential DCC and privately owned land which could then be explored with the community and progressed via the Lead Member (DCC).

It was suggested by the Ivybridge representative that a permanent site could be considered in proximity to the Sherford New Town development.

Single Point of Contact/Escalation Protocol:

It was requested that the existing Traveller Liaison E-mail Groups be given a higher profile and made more accessible, and that more agencies be required to sign up to the Group.

It was further suggested that a single point of contact be determined in relation to all the issues arising from traveller sites, that individuals or organisations could liaise with. This was felt necessary as a local Town Council had struggled to get support when faced with a problem with a travelling encampment in their district and the legal route was expensive. They had been told by the County Council that if the issue was not on their land they were not required to get involved. The District Council had a responsibility to provide waste facilities but it was not their role to provide free legal advice and the police had stated their involvement would be discretionary to maintain public order or provide access to services. It was noted that private landowners were often desperate for a solution when they discovered an encampment on their land and this needed to be taken account of.

Arising from the above comments it was felt that an 'Escalation Procedure/Protocol' be devised to include emergency contacts, in order to prevent public disorder or community tensions running very high. The Protocol could then be emailed along with relevant contacts to all interested parties whenever significant traveller movements were reported. This would enable swift and effective co-ordinated action.

In conclusion the Chairman thanked representatives for their attendance and participation in what had been a very positive and awareness raising meeting. The Strategic Director (Community – SHDC) also stated that he had been heartened to see so many organisations represented and hoped they would participate in future liaison meetings with Penny Dane (Devon REC).

Summary of Key Action Points:

- Establish an Escalation Protocol to trigger emergency action;
- Establish a Travelling Communities 'Single Point of Contact' (SPOC) for organisations and individuals; and
- Create a map of potential DCC and privately owned land for discussion with communities and for progression by the Lead DCC representative.

Other Action Points:

- Investigate work/approaches to site provision undertaken by Mid Devon District Council and South Somerset District Council in relation to Travelling Communities; and

Key Issues:

- Identifying suitable land for Permanent and Transit sites
- Waste from illegal stopping places
- Challenging prejudice and promoting tolerance

Appendix 1:

Supt Sharpe has supplied the following four strategic aims that could be developed or adopted by the Local Strategic Partnership.

- Local Strategic Partnership to work to assist in restoring confidence of the settled communities within South Hams
- To ensure a consistent minimum level of response to any issue involving a group of Travellers in South Hams
- To promote an acceptable level of tolerance between the settled and transient communities
- To support the local authority in the provision of transit sites within South Hams and across the county of Devon