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Press Statement from GATE Essex on Basildon Borough Council's Gypsy, Traveller, and Travelling Showpeople Topic Paper (2024)

GATE Essex welcomes Basildon Borough Council's recognition of the significant accommodation challenges faced by Gypsies, Travellers, and Travelling Showpeople in the borough. Acknowledging that the current provision falls far short of meeting the pressing need for legal pitches is an important first step. However, we have serious concerns over the absence of a clear, concrete strategy and the Council's continued reliance on enforcement measures over proactive, family-first solutions.

A Positive Acknowledgement with Critical Gaps

It is encouraging that the Topic Paper identifies the need for an additional 235 Gypsy and Traveller pitches and 13 Travelling Showpeople plots. Recognising these figures underlines the urgency of the situation. Nevertheless, the Council's approach—relying on a “call for sites” rather than committing to the immediate allocation and securing of land—risks leaving vulnerable families in prolonged uncertainty.

Lack of Transit Site Provision – A Systemic Failure

One of the most alarming gaps in the Topic Paper is the complete lack of provision for transit sites, both within Basildon and across the wider county of Essex. Without any authorised transit pitches, families who travel for work or cultural reasons have nowhere legal to stop. This forces them into unauthorised encampments, which in turn leads to increased enforcement actions under Section 4 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act. Essex as a whole has failed to meet its duty to provide transit accommodation, leaving Gypsies and Travellers in an impossible situation—criminalised for stopping, yet given no lawful alternatives.

Concerns Over an Enforcement - First Approach

We are particularly troubled by the Council's heavy focus on enforcement, underpinned by the use of powers in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act. While enforcement may seem like a short-term solution, it does nothing to address the root cause of unauthorised encampments: the lack of legal stopping places. Without suitable accommodation options, the ongoing cycle of eviction and displacement will only continue, pushing families further into crisis.

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Upholding Equality: The Imperative of the Lisa Smith Decision

The Lisa Smith ruling reaffirmed that Gypsies and Travellers should not be excluded from housing needs assessments simply because they are no longer able to travel. However, Basildon's approach appears to follow the outdated definition set out in the Planning Policy for Traveller Sites (PPTS), which excludes many Gypsies and Travellers from being counted in official assessments. The Council must ensure that its policies fully comply with this legal precedent and that all Gypsy and Traveller families—regardless of their mobility—are accounted for when planning accommodation.

A Call for Immediate, Inclusive Action

GATE Essex calls on Basildon Borough Council to:

- **Commit to Immediate Land Allocation:** Move beyond aspirational “calls for sites” by identifying and securing specific parcels of land to create permanent legal accommodation.
- **Provide Transit Site Provision:** Work with Essex County Council to urgently identify land for public transit sites, ensuring that travelling families are not left with no lawful options.
- **Prioritise Family Wellbeing Over Displacement:** Reassess an enforcement-first approach, particularly the use of Section 4 powers, to ensure families are never left without a legal, safe, and secure home.
- **Implement the Lisa Smith Decision Fully:** Ensure that housing needs assessments are inclusive and non-discriminatory, protecting the rights of all Gypsies and Travellers, including those who no longer travel.

Looking Forward

GATE Essex remains committed to working collaboratively with Basildon Borough Council and all stakeholders to forge a pathway that transforms acknowledgment into tangible, lasting change. We believe that a balanced strategy—one that marries immediate family support with long-term planning—will be key to securing a future where every Gypsy, Traveller, and Travelling Showpeople family can live with dignity and certainty.

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The continued failure to provide transit sites across Essex must be urgently addressed. Without lawful stopping places, Gypsies and Travellers will remain trapped in a cycle of criminalisation, enforcement, and displacement. We urge Basildon Borough Council and Essex County Council to act now to ensure fair and legal accommodation for all.

Together, we can build a fairer, more secure future for our communities.