The Gypsy/Travelling Community in the Scottish Borders

The gypsy/travelling Community is a key equality group in Scottish Borders Community Planning Partnership approach to equalities. The Community Planning process in the Scottish Borders is underpinned by equality and diversity actions and needs, in line with the Equality Act (2010), and is supported by a core group of equality officers from the statutory organisations including Scottish Borders Council, NHS Borders, Lothian and Borders Police, Lothian and Borders Fire and Rescue Service and the Voluntary Sector. This joint approach allows us to make best use of resources, share information and best practice and enables more effective engagement with the key equality groups. As part of this work there is a gypsy/traveller policy group which meets regularly and has developed an action plan – the core group of equality officers are members of this group.

The gypsy/travelling community has played an important part of the history of the Scottish Borders. Gypsy traveller music, story telling and art also play a role in the region’s cultural heritage. Every summer a number of gypsy/travellers pass through the region. They mainly stay in unauthorised sites for short periods of time.

The Official Gypsy/Travelling People’s Site

The Scottish Borders has one official gypsy/traveller site operating between April and October each year and consisting of 10 traveller pitches. The site is well located and forms part of a commercial caravan site in Innerleithen leased from Scottish Borders Council and managed, on the Council’s behalf by a commercial landlord. Tenants on the site normally stay throughout the summer period. The pitches consist of an area of hard standing and access to an amenity unit with bath/shower/toilet facilities and space for domestic appliances. There is one unit adapted for disability needs. The pitches have space to accommodate a large residential trailer caravan and vehicle parking space. The weekly rent for the pitches is currently £45 per week.

The community health service has a close relationship with tenants on this site. This is the only commercially managed authorised gypsy/traveller site in Scotland. All other authorised sites are either operated by local authorities or housing associations. The site is considered by the Scottish Travellers Site Managers Association to be very well managed with effective entry conditions for tenants based on references. Council operated sites have entry restriction similar to those for housing lets.

Any complaints about the site are normally made to the commercial landlord but tenants can also make use of the SBC complaints procedure. The Scottish Borders Council gypsy/travellers policy action plan for 2012./2013 includes an action to review the management agreement with the operators of the site. This review will include review of the arrangements for recording and
addressing complaints to be included in the draft new lease and management agreement.

Some gypsies/travellers stay on private sites either owned by others or by themselves. The planning process considers applications for site pitches on their merits and in accordance with planning policies.

There is no evidence that there is a requirement for an additional authorised site in the Scottish Borders but there is recognition that more evidence needs to be sought and a survey is carried being undertaken to gather more information on the accommodation needs of gypsy /travellers.

**Gypsy/Traveller Liaison and Support**

A Scottish Borders Council supported initiative has been under way since June 2010 to make contact with gypsy and travelling people locating on unauthorised sites in the Scottish Borders. This involves a person appointed by Scottish Borders Council who makes initial contact with gypsies and travellers and requests information on their service needs and length of stay. This information is then passed on to relevant Council Services and other agencies including Lothian and Borders Police and NHS Borders. A leaflet is provided to gypsy/travellers who stay on unauthorised sites that are owned by Scottish Borders Council. This sets out the services available to them and their responsibilities whilst staying on the site.

Between June and October 2010 the gypsy travelling liaison person made contact with approximately 230 gypsy/travellers in 77 separate caravans on 13 unauthorised encampments on Scottish Borders Council and privately owned sites. The longest stay was for 11 days and the shortest was 4 days. The reason for the stay is to find opportunities for making money by carrying out gardening, repairs and other types of jobs in local communities.

Between March 2011 and October 2011 the gypsy/travelling liaison person made contact with 200 gypsy/travellers in 75 caravans in 17 unauthorised encampments. The longest stay was 8 days and the shortest stay was one day. The liaison process has worked well. It has enabled a proactive approach to be adopted for short stays on unauthorised sites that are in the ownership of the Council. It has also enabled an effective approach to be implemented for dealing with short stay camping on unauthorised sites to be put in place. Gypsy/travellers are provided with information about public services, refuse collections sacks are provided and the waste is uplifted by the Council.

The gypsies and travellers who move on to unauthorised sites appear not to be looking for more permanent site. The survey currently being carried includes questions about the accommodation needs of gypsy/travellers. The results will enable conclusion to be reached on further accommodation requirements.
The main official gypsy/travelling community event in the Scottish Borders is the St Boswells Fair which takes places in July each year. In 2010 and 2011 the Fair was attended by relatively small numbers of caravans. This event is supported by Scottish Borders Council, Lothian and Borders Police and NHS Borders and information is jointly provided in the form of a leaflet which includes a site plan, available services, and useful contact details.

In terms of education, an educational guidance policy is being developed for the children of gypsy/travellers. There is one part time teacher who is providing specialist additional educational for children of gypsy and travelling families which represents the current identified need.

During 2011 NHS Borders, working with the gypsy travelling liaison person, carried out a bowel screening campaign with gypsy travelling people locating on both authorised and unauthorised sites. Gypsy/travelers are a key target group for Keep Well (health checks for people between the ages of 40-64). NHS Borders Public Health is currently working with the gypsy traveller liaison person to identify if any gypsy/travellers are registered with GPs in the Scottish Borders, if they are interested in a holistic health check in the form of Keep Well, and if so where they would be able to attend.

As part of the equalities and diversity training within the Council, NHS Borders, the Police and Fire and Rescue Services and other partners the needs of gypsy travellers are recognised and discussed and the needs of this group are also considered within the Equality Impact Assessments of policies and projects.

Douglas Scott
Scottish Borders Council
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