

WRITTEN EVIDENCE PAPER TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT & HOUSING COMMITTEE

Minister for Social Justice, September 2023

I welcome this opportunity to provide an update to the Committee's inquiry into the provision of sites for Gypsy, Roma and Travellers.

We remain strongly committed to ensuring improvement of the situation for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. We seek to engage with communities and take into account their needs in policy development and we recently met with community representatives on 13th September. We also advocate for their needs to be taken into account by central government on non-devolved matters, but regrettably we have had limited impact in this regard. For example, the Alternative Fuel Payment introduced in April 2023 was largely inaccessible for GRT communities because it firstly was not widely communicated plus the qualifying criteria precluded the majority of the communities.

We provide support for advocacy services for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, which is currently delivered through Travelling Ahead at a cost of £180K per annum. This work of Travelling Ahead provides direct support to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families to help individuals access public services but also to advocate widely on their behalf and helps them to access support where needed.

The Welsh Government's commitment to ending racism is demonstrated through our Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, which aims to build an anti-racist Wales by 2030. The plan supports specific actions in relation to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities to ensure all voices are heard and opinions visible and communicated.

As part of this officials have undertaken site visits across Wales over the last year months to understand the challenges faced to site development and planning decisions. This has included visits to both private and Local Authority run sites to understand the barriers faced and opportunities to develop and improve sites.

Site provision in Wales

The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 created a duty to identify and meet the need for appropriate accommodation. Since then, we have seen well over two hundred new pitches either created, or refurbished, many on small, privately-owned family sites. This compares to only a handful of new pitches created between 1997 and 2014.

However, progress has not been sustained in every part of Wales. Having introduced legislation and provided significant funding to address the need, in some cases plans have stalled for several years.

I expect all Local Authorities in Wales to ensure sufficient site and pitches are provided to meet the identified needs of Gypsy communities across Wales. I expect them to accurately assess needs and set out a clear plan of action to address those

needs, ensuring that communities have access to culturally appropriate accommodation through Local Authority and private sites. The current provision for permanent and transit sites falls far short of requirements and that cannot continue.

The GTAA process

The requirements to prepare Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessments (GTAAs) and report on the need for additional sites and pitches in their area, including both permanent and temporary transit sites, were established in 2014. Local Authorities submit a GTAA to the Welsh Government. This should be – but has not always been – created in consultation with the local GRT community. The Welsh Government then reviews the GTAAs, providing feedback and approving them or requesting amendments. Local Authorities then take forward the agreed actions. The process has highlighted the significant challenges faced by Gypsy and Traveller communities, particularly in relation to their meaningful engagement in the development of the GTAAs. I also acknowledge that progress has been slow on our part, initially affected by the COVID pandemic and more recently by severe staffing constraints in the relevant policy team.

We are currently reviewing the robustness of the GTA Assessments across Wales to meet the site needs across Wales for Gypsy and Traveller communities. Officials are working with Local Authorities and Gypsy and Traveller communities to identify the extent of the requirements and understand the barriers which still exist to prevent progress. I will be writing to each Local Authority with the outcome of those assessments. I have recently met with the WLGA and Council Cabinet leads for Equality to help understand those challenges better and seek agreement to work collaboratively across Wales to ensure adequate site provision is a priority for both permanent and transit sites.

Once this has been completed, I will be undertaking bilateral meetings with Local Authorities to review their GTAAs and understand their progress. I will explore with them the steps required to overcome any barriers which remain, and to seek affirmation of their commitment to ensuring sufficient provision of permanent and transit sites across Wales to meet the needs of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in line with the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan. This will be a useful opportunity to remind them about the Welsh Government grant as an important tool for progressing work to improve sites and create new ones.

The Gypsy Traveller Capital Grant

The purpose of the Gypsy Traveller Capital Grant is to support site development. It can be used for refurbishing existing accommodation, constructing new pitches and improving the sustainability of sites for residents, and other capital expenditure related to improving sites. Applications are received and agreed as part of a rolling programme.

Proposals for new sites, and even for improvements, are often complex and require community engagement and sometimes attract challenges to decisions. This means the timeline for plans for new sites or amendments to existing sites can sometimes take considerable development before planning and grant applications are made.

We continue to make sure Local Authorities across Wales are aware of the grant; however, despite this, the grant has either not been fully utilised or those grants which have initially been awarded have been delayed due to slower than planned or incomplete building works, which means Local Authorities cannot complete the grant claims. Some Local Authorities have also indicated that they are awaiting the response to the GTAA's from the Welsh Government, which has been delayed, before requesting grant funding.

The allocation and disbursement of the grant since conception is presented below. Whilst disbursement rates have been low in recent years, I expect to see these increase significantly in 2024/2025.

Year	Allocation	Disbursement	Notes
2020/2021	3,500,000	1,213,416	Disbursement this year was heavily affected by COVID.
2021/2022	3,500,000	2,540,026	Affected by COVID and staff shortages
2022/2023	3,690,000	0	Affected by staff shortages
2023/2024*	3,190,000	N/A	Financial year not complete so disbursement not available.

Forward look

I expect the policy team to be up to strength by the end of this year. As the team come on board, they will be focussed on completing the GTAA process and encouraging Local Authorities to access the grant. I will continue to advocate for GRT communities. We will continue to support GRT advocacy and support services and engage with the GRT groups to identify other ways to support GRT communities.