

PROGRESS TOWARDS CRE RECOMMENDED PRACTICE ON TRAVELLER ISSUES

Based on recommendations made in the Commission for Racial Equality's report, "Common Ground: equality, good race relations and sites for Gypsies & Irish Travellers", May 2006. Details of SCDC's practices are set out in the boxes.

CRE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Leadership, strategy and practice

1. "Develop a holistic corporate vision for all work on Gypsies and Irish Travellers, and anchor it within the community strategy, the local development framework and any other relevant strategy, including the race equality scheme."

Already in place: The Council agreed its policy on Traveller Issues in July 2004. Specific actions are featured in the 2004-07 Community Strategy. Further ones will be incorporated into the next edition, now being planned. A Development Plan Document on future Traveller site provision is being prepared as part of the LDF. The Race Equality Scheme gives priority to actions relating to Travellers, as the biggest ethnic minority in the district.

2. "Review all policies on accommodation for Gypsies and Irish Travellers, to ensure a long-term, coordinated and strategic approach that promotes race equality and good race relations. This should include policy on planning and providing sites, managing authorised and unauthorised encampments and conventional housing, and be supported by data collection and consultation with local communities. Strategy on accommodation should be linked to wider service areas, such as health & education, and a communications strategy."

Partly in place and already identified as a future action: Planning policy on Traveller sites is already included in the current Local Plan. Consultants commissioned by the Council are working with local Travellers and the settled communities to identify sites for current and future need, and to advise the Council as it prepares its Development Plan Document.

The Local Strategic Partnership identified the need for the Travellers' Needs Survey in the Community Strategy, and this has been carried out. The Council's Race Equality Scheme features actions for reviewing/updating the Housing and Homelessness strategies. SCDC's Communications strategy has also been scheduled for review by March 2007.

3. "Designate a councillor at cabinet level and an officer at no less than assistant director level, to coordinate the authority's work on sites (authorised and unauthorised), to make sure it is consistent across departments, and is linked to its work on equality."

Already in place: SCDC's policy on Traveller issues assigns responsibilities to the Council Leader and portfolio-holders for Planning Policy and Community Development. The Information and Customer Services portfolio-holder is the lead Member for the

Race Equality Scheme. At office-level, the Strategic Officer Group (involving the Executive Director and service heads) co-ordinates SCDC's work on Traveller issues: this includes the Head of Policy & Communication, who is the lead officer for race equality.

4. "Develop a robust performance management system for all aspects of services for Gypsy sites, within a wider accommodation framework, including providing & managing sites and managing unauthorised encampments. Include these functions in internal service reviews."

Already in place and being developed: Traveller issues are covered in a cross-cutting service plan and are featured as a major issue both in the Council's Performance Plan and the corporate risk register. The Strategic Officer Group keeps an overview of progress, and greater monitoring of service usage (by ethnicity) is being developed. The Corporate Projects Officer co-ordinates day-to-day activities. Within Community Services, monthly supervision sessions are held with the Travellers' Liaison Officer to identify actions in relation to the management of Council-run sites.

The duty to promote race equality and good race relations

5. "Add two separate categories for Gypsies and Irish Travellers in all ethnic monitoring arrangements. Take steps to encourage them to provide information about their ethnicity."

Already in place and being developed: The Council agreed the new monitoring categories in January 2006 as part of the 2005–08 Race Equality Scheme. Revised monitoring forms have been introduced for housing, homelessness and benefits services and for job applicants. In addition, the county-wide Traveller Co-ordination Group (which involves SCDC's Head of Policy & Communication) is considering whether there may be any scope for developing a joint approach across councils and other partners.

6. "Make sure that the duty to promote race equality and good race relations, and issues relating to Gypsies and Irish Travellers, are written into all partnerships with the police, and providers of education and health services, and into all relevant procurement arrangements, including those with external trainers, site managers and bailiffs."

Partly in place, but needs to be developed: This is covered in the terms of reference of the county-wide Traveller Co-ordination Group of councils, the police, health services and other partners. Race equality considerations are also included in the project brief for the consultants commissioned to prepare the Council's Development Plan Document on future Traveller site provision.

In the light of the CRE's recommended practice, references to the duty to promote race equality will be incorporated into SCDC's annual service level agreements with voluntary and community organisations receiving grant-funding from the Council. The Race Equality Scheme already features an action to develop appropriate contract clauses to expect contractors to reflect good race equality practice.

Public sites

7. "Conduct a reliable and full assessment of the need for residential and transit sites (as required by the Housing Act 2004), by making sure that questionnaires take account of Gypsies' and Irish Travellers' cultural traditions, and that staff responsible for the assessment have been trained to understand the needs of these groups, both on sites (including private and public sites, and unauthorised encampments) and in housing."

Already in place: The survey was carried out across the sub-region by consultants, using Travellers to undertake the fieldwork. It was commissioned by a consortium of councils across Cambridgeshire (with others from Suffolk and Norfolk). Provisional results were reported to SCDC's Cabinet in December 2005, followed by a final report in June 2006. A public launch of the sub-regional results takes place in mid-July 2006.

8. "Review the quality of sites, and arrangements for managing them (including allocation policies, repairs services and the costs of utilities), to ensure that they are providing essential services, and at standards comparable to those in conventional social housing."

Already identified as a future action: Plans to carry out such a review of the Blackwell and Whaddon sites during 2005/06, with the County Council, had to be deferred due to staff shortages on both sides. In the light of the CRE's recommended practice, SCDC will contact the County Council again to make new arrangements for this review.

9. "Consult everyone concerned at the earliest stage of developing a site. Make sure that all stages of consultation on unauthorised encampments (and proposed public and private sites) allow Gypsies and Irish Travellers, as well as other members of the public, to take full part, are effectively chaired, and contribute to better relations between different groups."

Already in place and being developed: Following the results of the Traveller Needs Survey, the Council has commissioned specialist consultants to prepare a Development Plan Document on future Traveller site provision with the district. SCDC has supported the production of a CD by the Ormiston Children & Families Trust about the DPD process.

Initial consultation evenings for Travellers and for parish councils have taken place, facilitated by the consultants. Following these events, and in response to invitations, the consultants have already visited the pitches of a number of Gypsy and Irish Traveller families in order to gain a more detailed understanding of local needs. There will be opportunities for wider public consultation later this year.

10. "Develop formal policies on pitch allocations for all new sites, similar to those for conventional housing, and draw up a reasonable timetable for extending the policies to existing sites."

Already identified as a future action: This will take place as part of the LDF process for preparing the Development Plan Document on future Traveller site provision.

Planning

11. "Refer to Gypsies and Irish Travellers in the statement of community involvement (which explains how all groups will be consulted on planning policy), and take practical steps to get them meaningfully involved, where possible building on existing relationships."

Already identified as a future action: This is programmed to take place in 2007 as part of the LDF process. Although the statement of community involvement is not yet in place, the Council has consulted the following groups through the LDF process: the Gypsy Council for Education (Culture, Welfare and Civil Rights); the Romany Institute; the Romany Guild; the Society of Travelling People; the Gypsy Council (Romani Kris); Cambridge Ethnic Community Forum; and the Commission for Racial Equality.

12. "Give specific advice to Gypsies and Irish Travellers, at an early stage, on the most suitable land for residential use, and on how to prepare applications, and help them to find the information they need to support their application."

Already in place: Planning officers offer advice and assistance to Travellers in submitting planning applications. This is reinforced by the Council's policy on Traveller issues, which encourages Travellers to approach the Council in advance about their proposals to develop land.

Officers have provided detailed guidance on what Travellers can do to improve their chances of gaining approval. Where needed, officers complete applications on behalf of Travellers and, where help cannot be provided, direct them to where such help can be obtained. In relevant cases, this includes referral to Planning Aid. In addition, SCDC has supported the production of another CD by the Ormiston Children and Families Trust, which provides information on planning for Gypsies and Travellers.

13. "Develop an internal policy on how to handle racist representations, and make sure officers know how to use it, so that only material considerations relating to the application are presented to members of the planning committee."

Already in place: The Council's Development Control manual, which sets expected practice to be followed by planning staff, features the RTPI (Royal Town Planning Institute) code. As members of the RTPI, all professional planning staff are required "in all their professional activities....to eliminate discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, creed, religion & disability and, in particular,....to promote equality of opportunity between people of different racial groups & good race relations".

In addition, the Council's standard 'neighbour consultation' letter already points out that SCDC can only take account of material considerations, which excludes 'personal factors'.

14. "Monitor all planning applications and instances of enforcement action at every stage, by type and racial group, including Gypsies and Irish Travellers, as two separate categories, in order to assess the effects of policies and practices on different racial groups."

Partly in place: SCDC keeps track of relevant planning applications and enforcement cases in order to make sure that committee members are made aware of human rights and equal opportunities considerations relating to Gypsies and Irish Travellers. Ethnic monitoring for all applications has been not introduced, however, as many are made by agents, acting on behalf of residents, who may not know their clients' personal details.

15. "Consider using the overview and scrutiny committee, or any other suitable formal mechanism, to assess the effects on race equality and race relations of any major decision to enforce planning requirements on Gypsy sites."

Already in place: Reports to the Development and Conservation Control Committee (or relevant sub-committees) relating to planning enforcement matters at Traveller sites already include assessments of human rights, race relations and individual needs. This is the appropriate mechanism given that planning and enforcement decisions do not come within the remit of SCDC's Scrutiny and Overview Committee. That said, the Scrutiny Committee has considered the Council's overall approach to Traveller issues on a couple of occasions, including questions to the Leader of the Council.

Unauthorised encampments

16. "Review and monitor policies for dealing with unauthorised encampments, to make sure they promote access to services for occupants, and good race relations between them and other groups: in doing this authorities should focus in particular on providing basic facilities, assessing welfare needs and communicating effectively with the public."

Already in place: This takes place both via SCDC's Strategic Officer Group and the county-wide Traveller Co-ordination Group. Traveller welfare was assessed as part of the recent Travellers' Needs Survey, which was commissioned by a consortium of local authorities in the Cambridge sub-region. In addition, local authorities in Cambridgeshire have agreed a protocol with the Police for dealing with unauthorised encampments. The Council's Traveller Liaison Officer and Planning Enforcement Officers visit Traveller sites on a regular basis, provide advice on SCDC services (eg, benefits) and make arrangements for refuse collection.

17. "Make sure the duty to promote race equality and good race relations is built into any contracts for managing, or evicting from, unauthorised encampments; and that contractors are given clear guidance on how this might affect their policy and practice, and monitored on their compliance with the guidance."

Already in place: In cases where enforcement action has been planned against unauthorised development on land owned by Travellers, the Council has made contractors aware of race equality policy and requirements. Taking action against unauthorised encampments (on land owned by a third party) is the responsibility of the land-owner: advice for landowners and Travellers is featured on the Council's website.

Housing

18. "Conduct research to identify the numbers and needs of Gypsies and Irish Travellers in conventional housing, and explicitly include these groups in relevant housing policy (including housing, homelessness and supporting people strategies), with links to site-related services."

Already in place and being developed: This has been covered by the Traveller Needs Survey, which covers need for health, education and other services, as well as housing. The Council has accepted that Travellers form part of the overall housing need within the District. Following on from those survey results, the Council is now working with the County Council and other partners to review the Supporting People Strategy.

19. “Formally record, investigate and monitor all reported incidents of racial harassment made by Gypsies and Irish Travellers in conventional housing, take steps to encourage reporting and develop targeted preventive strategies.”

Already in place: This is covered by our handling of any complaints made by tenants of anti-social behaviour, and also by the Council’s complaints and compliments procedure.

Promoting good race relations and integrated communities

20. “Encourage dialogue & positive interaction between Gypsies and Irish Travellers and other groups, through effective engagement with leaders and members of all communities.”

Already in place and being developed: A Travellers’ Forum, which was set up by SCDC in the northern parishes, is now being extended to cover the whole district. Both Gypsies and Irish Travellers have come together in consultation meetings as part of the preparations for the Development Plan Document. SCDC has also arranged meetings for all parish councils to discuss Traveller issues and has taken part in meetings of community leaders in Cottenham. In addition, Cabinet members and local district councillors have participated in discussions with both Cottenham and Willingham parish councils.

21. “Actively promote better public understanding of Gypsies and Irish Travellers, and the consequences of unmet need for sites; and take steps to counter stereotypes in the media and in public perceptions.”

Already in place and being developed: Strengthening community relations forms a key part of the Council’s policy on Traveller issues. This underpinned by the work of the Council’s community services, the communications team and corporate co-ordination of SCDC’s approach. Examples of recent initiatives include:

- support for local productions and outreach to schools by the Romany Theatre Company; and
- the Traveller liaison officer’s role at the Midsummer Fair in Cambridge last month (popular with both the settled and Travelling communities), providing information and inviting comments on Traveller issues.

Awareness-raising articles have been featured in South Cambs magazine, which is distributed to households and Traveller sites throughout the district. The Council has also developed extensive web information on Traveller issues, which is due to be refreshed over the next few months. SCDC works closely with the media to increase understanding of Traveller needs and the Council's policy, which is based on contributing to future site provision, strengthening community relations and enforcing planning law fairly and consistently. The Council Leader has made clear that Travellers are entitled to live in the district as much as anyone else. SCDC's new media pack, distributed in June 2006, includes the CRE's guidance for journalists on reporting on race issues (as featured in the Council's Race Equality Scheme).

As well as increasing public understanding, SCDC also works hard to increase cultural awareness of Travellers within the Council. There are annual workshops on Traveller issues for councillors – this year's event included speakers from the Travelling community, who were very well-received. In addition, Cabinet members and staff have received cultural awareness training, which has been reinforced by a tour of Traveller sites in the district.

22. "Encourage and support mainstream voluntary organisations to build bridges between Gypsies and Irish Travellers and other members of the public."

Partly in place, but needs to be developed: The Council works closely with the Ormiston Children and Families Trust as part of the Cambridgeshire Travellers Initiative. In the light of the CRE's recommended practice, SCDC will also raise awareness of the Council's Race Equality Scheme and policy on Traveller issues as part of the annual review meetings in October/November with voluntary and community organisations which receive grant-funding support.