

Comments from Councillor Tom Nicols

on Secretary of State proposed changes to RSS14

Planning for Gypsy & Traveller Accommodation

1. I would wish to re-state the original response from South Beds District Council on the fundamental philosophy that forms the basis of the T&G needs study. SBDC made it very clear that Need should not be conflated with desire or want. Whilst most councils, EERA and CLG all seem to have taken the view that the T&G needs study is legitimate SBDC wished to leave a very clear marker that this fundamental was not acceptable to them.

I very much support this view and would not want it to be left unstated. If we should need to establish our objection to this fundamental at some point in the future then we should maintain this marker.

2. I challenge the need to accept the requirement to house travelling Showpeople either at the number required, or (and particularly) as a minimum. The justification for accommodating regular Travellers and Gypsy's is that they need to be close to the foci of their employment –which is in the Urban areas. The studies done by EERA for Travelling Show persons seems to suggest that they can readily house their business some considerable distance from the Eastern region. Their business model being that they return to their bases in the winter months and go out on the road in the summer.
3. The reason that the pitch provision for South Bedfordshire was raised from 45 to 50 and Mid Beds from 25 to 30 was I believe because a number of urban centres insisted that they could not accept the 15 pitches that was allocated to them. I believe; for instance, that Watford dropped from 15 to 10 and that Stevenage lost its entire commitment for 15 pitches. I note that Stevenage is the authority represented by the Minister for the Eastern region. I feel that we should insist that all authorities should accept the commitment that was originally proposed by EERA.
4. I have noted that little if any guidance exists that establishes the size in area for a Traveller or Gypsy site. The guidance is somewhat vague with a reference within guidance that states that “No maximum size restriction should be placed on a Traveller or Gypsy pitch. This is palpably ridiculous as individual families could demand pitches that occupy sites that are many hectares in size. However I note that the government circular “Preparing RRS on regional Planning bodies” that I append to this covering Email makes reference in more than one place to pitch size as being 200sq M or 50 / Hectare. I further note that this carries the statement “this is a relatively generous average pitch size”. It was this 50 to the Hectare that was alluded to by EERA when they presented a seminar on this subject at priory House in 2007! I do not myself accept that traveller and gypsy

pitch size would be acceptable at 50 / Hectare but would assume that a size in the region of 20 / Hectare would be reasonable. In South Bedfordshire we have allowed many Traveller and Gypsy pitches to be sited that are substantially more generous than 20 / Hectare. I believe that many occupy sites that are bigger than 1/10th of a Hectare. I am making this point because I feel that the requirement that has been placed upon us to provide a number of transit pitches should be challenged. I would suggest that in areas where the average pitch size is substantially more generous than 50 / Hectare as referred to in this guide then no reasonable need should be in place for transit pitches.

5. My final point should focus on the new requirement by the secretary of State that pitch allocations should be regarded as a minimum. The reason that EERA got so much cooperation on this subject at the various regional Planning Panel meetings was that we all wanted to see an end to the insane position wherein our Planning officers spend so much of their time attempting to resolve Traveller and gypsy planning disputes. Many of us did not agree to the underlying proposition as 1. but we were all minded that it was better to accept the final requirement if it put an end to the debate. The term 'Minima' completely undermines this proposition and will clearly mean that where once we might have looked forward to that point where South Beds had met its 50 pitch requirement and Mid Beds its 30 pitch requirement that the debate about accepting ongoing Traveller and Gypsy pitches would be closed. With the insertion of the term 'Minima' this closure of a problem is lost.

I regard this particular issue as being of prime importance and not one that we should fail to challenge.

Regards

Councillor Tom Nicols

Friday, April 24, 2009