

Travellers' site search – Updated FAQs

Why is the Council consulting again on Church Grove's suitability as a Travellers' site? What has changed since 2007?

The site search undertaken in 2007 was to assist the Council in its aim of providing new accommodation for the Traveller families being re-located from the Thurston Road site. Although planning permission was subsequently granted for five pitches on the site, construction never commenced as, towards the end of 2008, the Thurston Road Travellers asked the Council if it would consider terms for the surrender of their licenses.

Once agreement had been reached, the plans for the site were put on hold as the infrastructure was not yet in place to accommodate caravans or touring homes.

However, the Council still has a requirement to provide a site to meet the anticipated need for its Gypsy and Traveller population. An independent assessment undertaken in 2011 recommended the provision of between four and nine pitches (i.e. sufficient accommodation for between four and nine families) and concluded that five pitches would give a suitable level of provision to meet the current need, subject to an ongoing review of future need.

On this basis, a new site search was undertaken during 2011 which resulted in the Church Grove site being recommended as the preferred site to meet the current need. It is for this reason that the Council is again consulting.

Why is the Church Grove site the preferred site?

Initially, Council officers compiled a long list of 41 potential sites across the borough. This was reduced to a shortlist of seven sites when the following objective criteria, which reflect the potential needs of Gypsy and Traveller sites, were applied:

- Suitability - within 800m of primary school, GP and food shop.
- Planning constraints - site must not be on designated open space or nature reserve or employment land etc.
- Availability - deliverable within a reasonable timescale (5 years).

The seven sites shortlisted using these criteria were:

- Laurence House Lorry Park, Canadian Avenue, SE6
- Church Grove (former Watergate School), Ladywell SE13
- Site of Former Greenvale School, Perry Rise, Forest Hill SE23
- Catford Dog Track and Adenmore Road Sites, Catford SE6
- Ladywell Leisure Centre Site, Lewisham SE13

- Giffin Street Site (rear of old Tidemill Primary School), Deptford SE8
- Deptford Green School (Upper School), Amersham Vale, Deptford SE8

Officers then scored each of these sites against the above criteria, with the addition of any known environmental concerns under the suitability criteria and a new criteria for alternative corporate use. It was this process that led to the Church Grove site being recommended as the preferred site.

Does the Council currently have planning permission to build on the Church Grove site?

Planning permission was granted to construct a Gypsy and Traveller site on Church Grove on 3 April 2008. Normally planning permission is subject to a condition that it expires after three years unless the development to which it relates is begun during that period and, at the time of the report to Mayor and Cabinet on 5 October 2011, the Council's understanding was that the planning permission for the Church Grove site had lapsed in April 2011.

However, it has subsequently been brought to the Council's attention that, where any proceedings are begun to challenge the validity of a planning permission, the three year period is extended by one year.

As judicial review proceedings were begun in relation to the planning permission, it is therefore still capable of being implemented until 3 April 2012.

Isn't the width of Church Grove insufficient to allow movement of caravans and emergency vehicles, especially when current problems with parking are taken into account?

The Council acknowledges that access to the Church Grove site remains a key area of concern for residents. Church Grove is generally 4.6m wide with car parking only permitted along the eastern side of the road. This provided sufficient access for the Council's Passenger Services bus fleet when it used to transport pupils to the former Watergate school up until 2003. The Council's refuse trucks still service the street on a weekly basis.

However, as agreed by the Mayor at the Mayor and Cabinet meeting of 5 October, Council officers are re-visiting the issue of access along with other issues that have been raised by residents.

If the site is on the flood plain of the River Ravensbourne, won't this have health and safety implications for the Travellers?

This was previously dealt with in the granting of planning permission. There are measures that can be employed to help prevent flooding, such as raising levels throughout the site and creating a 'buffer' zone on the part of the site nearest to the river, and these were incorporated in the design which was granted planning permission.

Isn't the site in a Conservation Area?

The site is not in a Conservation Area, although it is adjacent to the St Mary's Conservation Area.

Did the Travellers from the Thurston Road site ever really want to move onto the Church Grove site?

Of the two sites shortlisted in the 2007 search, Church Grove was very much preferred by the Thurston Road Travellers. As the Mayor and Cabinet report of 28 June 2007 states, they viewed the Laurence House Lorry Park as having several "key weaknesses", whereas their concerns about the Church Grove site "centred upon the proximity of the river, other than this they were generally supportive." Concerns regarding the river were subsequently addressed in the granting of planning permission, by raising levels throughout the site and creating a 'buffer' zone on the part of the site nearest to the river. It was due to other factors, including personal reasons, that the Thurston Road Travellers asked the Council if it would consider terms for the surrender of their licenses, enabling them to move on.

How many pitches would the Council be seeking to create on the Church Grove site?

The current planning permission includes five separate pitches. A pitch typically provides accommodation for one family unit, and usually includes a brick-built amenity building comprising a kitchen, living room and bathroom, plus space for a static caravan (containing bedrooms), a touring caravan and in some instances a car.

Each pitch is self-contained having its own address, boundary and postcode. Residents of permanent pitches on local authority gypsy and Traveller sites occupy under license agreements governed by the Mobile Homes Act 1983.

Who are Gypsies and Travellers?

Gypsies are Romany ethnic groups whose ancestors migrated from India in the tenth century and then mixed with European and other groups. Irish Travellers are a nomadic group who have been part of Irish society for centuries, and have since migrated to the UK.

How many Gypsy and Traveller families currently live in the borough of Lewisham?

The exact size of Lewisham's Gypsy and Traveller population is hard to estimate for several reasons. These include: housing records being unlikely to identify who or where they are; members of the Gypsy and Traveller communities being unable to identify themselves as such, partly because a number of service providers do not include them as a distinct ethnic category

in their equalities data gathering; or members of the Gypsy and Traveller communities being unwilling to declare their ethnicity in order to protect themselves from perceived discrimination and hostility.

As a result of these issues – which are common across the UK, not just in Lewisham - most assessments tend to underestimate the Gypsy and Traveller population size. The most recent London Gypsy And Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment (GTANA) in 2008 estimated 75 families in the borough of Lewisham, which it admitted was likely to be a “conservative figure”. This figure was indeed disputed by the Lewisham Traveller Forum, which argued the population size to be larger. Drawing on data gathered directly by service providers, in June 2009 the Forum suggested a figure of approximately 490 individual Gypsies and Travellers.

The London GTANA found the average Gypsy and Traveller family size across London to be 4.2 people, while the Lewisham Local Needs Assessment (2011) suggested an average family size of 4.9 people. As Irish Travellers tend to have larger family sizes compared to other Gypsy and Traveller ethnicities, and as Irish Travellers make up 70 per cent of the Lewisham Gypsy and Traveller population, it would be expected that the average Lewisham Gypsy and Traveller family size would be higher than the London average. But using the median figure of 4.55 as the average family size, the Lewisham Traveller Forum’s estimate of 490 Gypsies and Travellers would indicate the presence of approximately 108 families in the borough.

How are the borough’s Travellers being involved in this consultation?

As was the case with the Future Needs Assessment, officers have taken guidance from the Lewisham Traveller Forum and, in particular, the Lewisham Traveller Outreach Officer as to how best to engage the borough’s Traveller and Gypsy population.

The Outreach Worker has been made aware of all the various channels by which anyone may take part in the consultation, and is promoting these to the Travellers whom she meets during the normal course of her duties. Additionally, two drop-in sessions have been held at the Lewisham Irish Centre, with a further one penciled in for elsewhere in the borough.

Is Lewisham the only borough in London currently without a Gypsy and Traveller site?

No. According to the most recent Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment (GTANA) for London, there are five boroughs (Barnet, City of London, Enfield, Hammersmith and Fulham, Islington and Westminster) plus the City Of London with no 'current occupied residential site pitches'.

How many unauthorised sites does Lewisham have?

None at present.

What evidence does the Council have that a Gypsy and Traveller site is needed in the borough?

Of the estimated 108 Gypsy and Traveller families living in the borough of Lewisham, 24 have formally registered an interest in living on a designated Travellers' site. However, as stated in the independent Lewisham Gypsy and Travellers Future Needs Assessment (2011), while there is evident demand for a designated site, this does not necessarily translate into need.

Guidance on how to determine levels of housing need amongst Gypsies and Travellers, and how this compares to demand, is contained within the 2007 DCLG publication 'Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessments'. Having due regard to this guidance, the Lewisham Future Needs Assessment recommended the provision of between four and nine pitches (i.e. sufficient accommodation for between four and nine families) and concluded that five pitches would give a suitable level of provision to meet current need, subject to an ongoing review of future need.

How does provision in Lewisham compare to neighbouring boroughs?

- Bexley: 28 pitches
- Bromley: 62 pitches (across two sites)
- Greenwich: 40 pitches
- Southwark: 38 pitches (across four sites)

Assuming a site is built, on Church Grove or elsewhere, how will the various pitches be allocated?

The Council is currently looking to develop an allocations policy for this purpose. As part of this, we are reviewing various other authorities' policies, to see what can be learnt from them.

What rights do Gypsies and Travellers have?

The Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 placed a legal duty on public authorities to promote race equality and good race relations.

Under the Race Relations Act, it was unlawful to discriminate against anyone on grounds of race, colour, nationality (including citizenship), or ethnic or national origin. Gypsies and Irish Travellers have been recognised by the courts to be two distinct ethnic groups, so had the full protection of the Race Relations Act.

The public sector duties provided by the Race Relations Act, have been replaced by the new public sector Equality Duty which came into force pursuant to the Equality Act 2010.

The Equality Act will continue to provide protection against unlawful racial discrimination and promote equality of opportunity and good relations between people of different groups.

How long have there been Gypsies and Travellers in Britain?

It is believed that the Gypsies and Travellers of Britain have been here for at least 500 years, with the first recording dating all the way back to 1514.

What is Gypsy and Traveller culture?

Just like any ethnic group in the UK, Gypsies and Travellers have their own customs and traditions which are fundamental to their everyday life, such as having their own languages.

Why do Gypsies and Travellers live in built up areas rather than the countryside?

The Gypsies and Travellers who choose to reside in more urban areas do so for many of the reasons that most people do, to be closer to health care, schools, shops and work.

Would Travellers living on the Church Grove site be able to operate businesses from there?

The site would be purely residential and no commercial activity would be allowed on the site.

Why do Travellers have a brick building and a caravan?

The caravan/mobile home is only for sleeping. Travellers have traditionally lived in caravans for hundreds of years but when on a legal site with a license the Council provides them with amenity blocks which provide each household with its own utilities. New amenity blocks are designed to a very high standard to ensure that they are energy efficient and meet modern building requirements.