

Traveller planning policy continues to marginalise Gypsy families

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11/5/2015

Gypsies have rarely been served well by policy-makers in the UK. Here, [Martin Myers](#) outlines a glaring catch-22 embedded in planning policy for Traveller sites. The legislation and the discourse it uses work to reiterate fifteenth century legislation that requires Gypsies to comply or be cast out from society as non-citizens.



Published in August, [policy](#) from the Department for Communities and Local Government defines Gypsy and Traveller ethnicity in terms of a mobile or nomadic way of life. This makes the overt mobility of Gypsies a precondition of being granted planning permission for new Traveller sites.

Politically the policy is an effective measure: at a local level many voters protest against development plans for new Traveller sites. But restricting planning permission to “persons of a nomadic habit of life” will not improve existing accommodation problems. Fewer new sites will be built, with the potential to damage other areas of Gypsy lives. Such policy then, is ill-informed for at least two significant reasons.

Firstly, the association between Gypsy ethnicity and nomadism has long been a questionable assumption. Thomas Acton [railed](#) against anthropologists “maundering on” about Gypsies’ mysterious past and descriptions of Roma people as primarily nomadic, “ignoring the fact that many of their “subjects” are only four generations from slavery” (a subject recently dramatised in the film [Aferim!](#)).

Secondly, mobility itself can be better understood in terms of an axis between sedentary and nomadic lifestyles in which few individuals or groups are positioned at either diametric pole.

The planning regulation continues a history of policy which marginalises Gypsy and Traveller communities and will have a future impact, most particularly on access to education.

A history of policy marginalisation

Gypsies first arrived in the UK in the late 15th Century. Mistakenly believed to be Egyptians they encountered a hostile reception from the native population.

Fears about their presence materialised in policy terms through a succession of “[Egyptians Acts](#)”. These identified Gypsies in terms of criminality, fecklessness, dirt and mobility and introduced increasingly harsh measures of control. They banned further immigration and threatened Gypsies with deportation or imprisonment if they failed to adopt a sedentary lifestyle. The failure of this legislation culminated in the introduction of the death penalty for being a Gypsy in 1554.

The death penalty was repealed in 1783, however, a succession of legislation followed that discriminated against Gypsies. In particular it attempted to regulate and clamp down on nomadic aspects of identity. These included the Vagrancy Acts (1822-24), the Highways Act (1835) and the Hawkers and Pedlars Acts (1810-88).

The 1968 [Caravan Act](#) sought to relieve pressure on accommodation by forcing local councils to supply enough sites and pitches for families living in their area. It largely failed by being enacted locally in ways that effectively reduced the number of pitches available. Current legislation represents a further retrograde step.

A wider impact: how planning policy directly affects education

Since the 1960s an overwhelming [body of research and evidence](#) about Gypsy lives in the UK has been compiled by academics and civil servants. This work has repetitively catalogued failures to address identifiable problems including:

- Shortages of accommodation – in particular shortages of site provision by local authorities
- The poor quality and location of sites
- Inadequate health provision
- The tolerance of racism towards Gypsies
- Failure to deliver education services

The new legislation restricting Gypsy families accessing safe and secure accommodation will impact all aspects of their lives, but most particularly in education.

Firstly, there is a direct practical link between having secure accommodation and being able to [access effective education and schooling](#). The current legislation makes allowance for families with children of school age but this is identified as a temporary change of status. The reality of fewer sites being built is that fewer families will have a secure basis from which to access schools.

Secondly the policy emphasises Gypsy student identity in terms of mobility. Such policy emerges from discourses in which Gypsy difference is both identified and classified by non-Gypsy understandings of their difference.

The distinction between being a “sedentary” and a “mobile” student, or between a “sedentary” and a “non-sedentary” education is an interesting one. Conducting [research](#) on the South coast of England it was clear that teachers and education authorities identified the need to provide a “non-sedentary” education for Gypsy families. In some ways this aligned with the desires of Gypsy families themselves who also clearly identified their “difference” from the “*gaujo*” (non-Gypsy) population.

Many families referred to the importance of a history of travelling and movement within their family. Few however, were actively engaged in a lifestyle that might be construed as demonstrating mobility. A stark reminder of many families poverty was their *lack* of mobility. Families housed on sink-estates or living on poorly located sites on the edge of town were often faced with enormous difficulties trying to access municipal services linked directly to their lack of mobility.

It was also clear that the terminology of “sedentary” and “non-sedentary” education was only ever a distinction applied in discussions *about* Gypsy students. Teachers and education officials never used this terminology in discussions that were solely concerned with non-Gypsies.

Mobility and non-citizens

[Gypsy history](#) highlights a great resilience and ability to adapt in the face of changing economic and political climates. Freight policies targeted at controlling the lives of Gypsies with assumptions about nomadic or mobile identities is narrow-minded. It fails to engage in more pertinent aspects of their communal identities such as self-reliance and self-employment.

The policy readily taps into stereotypes that determine how wider services are delivered to Gypsy communities. There is clear evidence of the need to target more effective education [strategies](#) towards Gypsy students. These should embrace cultural differences both inside and outside the classroom. Defining these in terms of a “non-sedentary” education is inaccurate and excludes Gypsies more generally by establishing Gypsy lifestyle as sitting outside of legislation.

Rather than accepting multi-cultural difference, such policy contributes to a historic process of delineating Gypsies

as non-citizens, which will only continue their marginalisation.

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About the Author

[Martin Myers](#) is a researcher whose work engages with the lives of gypsy families. He has recently co-authored articles on [racism and bullying](#) in rural primary schools, and Gypsy and Traveller parents and [home schooling](#). He [blogs](#) and tweets [@DrMartinMeysers](#).



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