

Cottingley Springs Gypsy and Traveller site

Contact Gareth Self, Gypsy Services Communications Support Officer, on 0113 247 5493 or email gareth.self@leeds.gov.uk

Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers are among the oldest ethnic communities in Britain and the most disadvantaged. Many Gypsies and Travellers lack adequate accommodation and where sites exist, they are associated with many problems. This example of a Gypsy and Traveller site in Leeds illustrates the difficulties faced by this community in trying to improve the environment in which they live. Residents of Cottingley Springs site have begun planting gardens and are planning to improve the appearance of the entrance to their site and to create an attractive play area for their children. But lack of capacity within the community itself and the supportive voluntary sector, coupled with reticence on the part of the local authority and other mainstream agencies, combines to hinder their progress. BEN held a focus group with residents of Cottingley to try to find out how the Travellers could work together with others to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. In this article and the linked focus group report, residents and workers share their views on the ways forward.



Distinct communities, similar issues

Romany Gypsies can be found in many countries across the globe. They were one of the earliest ethnic communities to establish a presence in Britain and have retained their distinct cultural identity here for over four hundred years. The Romany language is similar to modern day Punjabi.

Irish Travellers can trace their cultural heritage back to the time of the potato famines, when vast numbers of Irish people starved or became homeless. Many survivors learned the skills needed for a life on the road and their histories have become interwoven with those of the Romany communities. Many Irish Traveller families came to England during the 1960s.

Whilst it is important to recognise the differences between different Traveller communities, in actual fact policies tend to impact each group in a similar way. Travellers often face a particularly insidious kind of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. Nomadic lifestyles are barely sanctioned by the

authorities and Traveller communities continue to face striking disadvantages, compared to other ethnic groups.

Large numbers of Gypsies and other Travellers have traditionally frequented West Yorkshire for many generations, staying in different locations for various periods in order to earn a living. At one time there were 225 caravans on road side or waste ground plots in and around Leeds. In spite of this fact, there are no officially recognised short stay sites in the area.

Cottingley Springs is the only permanent site and there is a strict allocations policy with a long waiting list. (The list is effectively closed.) Those lucky enough to get a pitch on a permanent site in the UK are not entitled to proper security of tenure. Councils only have to give four weeks notice to evict a Gypsy or Traveller. But since a test case by a Leeds man, the European Court of Human Rights has ruled in May 2004 that the UK Government must now change the law to give Gypsies and Travellers equal rights.

Meanwhile any Travellers pitching their caravans in places other than the one official site in Leeds are under great pressure to move on, with nowhere else to go! Many Travellers have bought their own land but are unable to obtain planning permission and therefore cannot reside there. This means that they are legally homeless and entitled to be offered accommodation, but this tends to mean settling in a house, giving up their traditional way of life and losing touch with their cultural heritage. As Violet Stewart said recently in Travellers' Times, "If this treatment were given to other ethnic people there would be an outcry."



Cottingley Springs in context

Cottingley Springs Gypsy and Traveller Site can be found on the outskirts of South Leeds, opposite the old Jewish cemetery on Gelderd Road in the ward of Wortley. It is in an area surrounded by fields, but cannot properly be described as open countryside, since it is so near to a busy motorway, in an area dotted with industrial estates and generally prone to air pollution, traffic noise etc.

There seems to have been a traditional stopping place here for many years, which has been adopted by the City Council as an official Travellers' site

since 1969. A purpose built site - or rather two adjacent sites - have been here for seventeen years : 'A site' was established in 1987 and accommodates mainly English Romany Gypsies; 'B site' was established two years later and is home to mainly Irish Travellers, although in reality there are links between the Irish Travellers and other sections of the wider Traveller community. However, 'A' and 'B' sites are used by two distinct social groups who hardly mix at all. This enforced proximity has led to serious tension in the past.

Refurbishment – a mixed blessing

The City Council received a government grant under the 1968 Caravan Sites Act to create permanent pitches for 41 families. Initially the sites comprised little more than a field with a toilet. The sites now enjoy their own water and electricity supply, properly surfaced road access and street lighting, separate pitches for each family with their own fenced and gated area, including hard-standing for caravans. On 'B' site, there is a brick built unit called a shed on every pitch, which houses a sitting room, kitchen, shower and toilet facilities.

However, serious hardship has resulted from the refurbishment since people were obliged, according to one commentator, to live "on a building site" during the work. In addition, water meters were installed, without the residents' consent – it is unclear whether this is permissible in law, but there is no doubt that it runs counter to the cultural beliefs of the Gypsy people who view water as a natural resource, not a commodity – and families' water supply was allegedly used by contractors during construction work, causing massive bills which residents are forced to pay off at severe rates.

When Community Development Worker Harjinder Sagoo started in post with Leeds Voice in 2001, with the remit to support BME groups, asylum seekers and refugees as well as Gypsies and Travellers, he had not had any previous contact with Travellers except the occasional scrap dealer. He told me that "because of everybody's perception" of Gypsies, he was dreading his first visit to Cottingley Springs. It was a very cold January morning when he was greeted by the Manager and Assistant Manager of the site, and taken to meet each of the residents. He had to build trust very gradually with the Travellers, who are wary of authority, by explaining "I am not from the council". Harjinder's role is to act as a go-between, liaising between the residents and the council. He began talking to individuals, finding out what they need and want. He says it took him two years to build trust.

At that time, the pitches had what Harjinder calls 'amenity huts' which were brick built, but very small, with the toilet too near to the kitchen and nowhere to dry washing.

Harjinder tried speaking to the Director of Housing, but had no joy. "I was fobbed off", he said. So from there he went to the Race Equality Council, who immediately set up a sub-committee to look into Gypsy and Traveller issues and put questions to the local authority. The council's response was to set up an inter-departmental board to address the concerns raised by the REC.

There was already an education service for Travellers in place, and this was joined by South Leeds Health Partnership for Travellers, a group of workers including health visitors, play workers etc. This large, multi-agency group had too cumbersome an agenda and so soon divided into three sections: education; health; and the accommodation group, which dealt with issues around unauthorised encampments as well as the official site.

It is to be hoped that this infrastructure will in time prove useful in the campaign to improve the lot of Gypsy people in Leeds; but for now, the Gypsies themselves do not seem to be aware of these political developments and there is little evidence as yet of their effectiveness at meeting the community's needs.

The council went on and made plans to improve the facilities on site, and contracted a Doncaster building firm to undertake the renovation work. The sites now enjoy their own water and electricity supply, properly surfaced road access and street lighting, separate pitches for each family with their own fenced and gated area, including hard-standing for caravans. On 'B' site, the amenity units, which the residents call 'sheds', have doubled in size to include a sitting room, kitchen, shower and toilet facilities, on every pitch. But in spite of being rather costly, the work was not completed to standard or within the estimated time scale. Harjinder told me that "people were really stressed as they were left without any heating or lighting over Christmas last year."

Meanwhile, 'A' site applied to ODPM in 2003 to upgrade the facilities, but was turned down. They applied again in 2004 and were successful, but the work has yet to take place.

Many improvements have been made over the years, but progress is slow and much work remains to be done. For instance, 'B' site has an office where residents can meet with the housing workers who manage and maintain the sites, and one tiny room of this building is used for monthly meetings of the Residents of Cottingley (ROC) group. 'A' site has just one small, brick built 'shed' which is used for fortnightly meetings, although in practice neither space is large enough for even a fraction of residents to gather at one time.

Until recently, the sites were not marked on maps and did not have a road sign to identify them. A supportive Green Party councillor arranged for that problem to be rectified. Aside from this, there is little in the way of infrastructure and few shared facilities on either site.



Potential for creating Green Spaces – improving the site entrance

Harjinder says that once the works were completed on 'B' site, "it looked like a concrete jungle." In terms of green space, there is some overgrown land near the entrance to each of the sites, which could be developed as an amenity, and consultations have begun with Leeds Voice, as the lead agency and Groundwork Leeds, to explore design ideas. Groundwork Designer Dale Woodcock has produced drawings based on suggestions from Cottingley residents, and these are on display in the 'B' site office. Leeds Voice are conducting ongoing consultations and once everybody is happy with the plans, will put the job out to tender.

One suggestion is for a metal work sculpture to showcase young people's traditional skills. There is an issue for education authorities in that many Gypsy children leave school at ages 12-14 to pursue traditional occupations, so the metalwork project could be a way to engage young people in an educational project which is culturally relevant and appropriate to their needs.

Veronica Keon, a teacher at the Traveller Education Service described how Traveller children in Leeds often seem very 'confident in their bodies' when they first arrive in school, due to their active, outdoor lifestyle (so they could be good role models for those less active, settled children who are the target of current government policies on healthy lifestyles) but she observed that they soon find the classroom boring, and want more practical lessons which affirm their culture and lifestyle. Being herself from an Irish family, Veronica has noticed that many Irish families (both Traveller and 'Gorgio' ie non-Traveller folk) "came off the land" but now that they are in England, they would never go off-site to go walking in the countryside because often, "they don't know it's there".

However, while the design stage drags on, commercial vehicles have come in across this patch of land and fly-tipped rubbish in the strip of woodland adjacent to the site. Since then boulders have been placed across the entrance to prevent recurrences but the rubbish remains.

The compound and children's play facilities

According to Richard Lancaster, Community Development Worker at South Leeds Health For All (SLHFA), on-site play space is invaluable to Cottingley residents, since the site is in an isolated location and the families there cannot easily access mainstream facilities. However, because it is a relatively small community, and because of the Travellers culture and lifestyle - they sometimes move off site and are not always there to look after things - there is reticence from the authorities to provide facilities.

There is an area of the Cottingley Springs site under tarmac, adjacent to the 'B' site office, which is sometimes used as a play area, but which desperately needs improving. Known as 'the compound', it is surrounded by a high fence which creates an unattractive environment but is needed to prevent various of the more itinerant Traveller families from other parts of Leeds coming to the site and fly tipping or pitching an unauthorised encampment.

There is no play equipment installed in the 'compound', only a surface of uneven tarmac, laid over the residue of industrial waste from previous uses of this brown-field site, which in turn rests upon naturally boggy ground – Cottingley Springs is so called for obvious reasons! The compound was used in the past for football and races, but has recently sprung a leak and been poorly repaired, so that play workers say it is unsafe and won't use it. The play workers from the Monday Traveller Funhouse came 3 or 4 days a week last year but this year their funding has been cut so they only come one day a week during school holidays to organise arts and crafts, games and sports.

Playworkers, including Karen Emery of SLHFA, did some consultation with residents aged 5-13. But as one resident told me, there was a consultation about play facilities with children on this site, herself included, 20 years ago but nothing was done, and now her children are being consulted. She is understandably cynical. According to Helen Jones, Co-ordinator of Leeds Gypsy and Traveller Exchange (GATE), the residents of Cottingley Springs are often used as a "captive audience for token consultations", to the exclusion of the many Romany people dwelling in houses in Leeds or on roadside park-ups.

Jimmy, a handsome young Gypsy man who is an ex prize fighter, wants to see a sports pitch on the compound, some proper play equipment with child-friendly soft tarmac, a basket ball net, and perhaps some attractive plants to soften the appearance of the high fence, some seating for parents to relax while supervising play sessions, and a lockable gate to which residents would have their own keys. However, Harjinder points out that the local authority are reluctant to take responsibility for the risk associated with any type of play equipment. Some residents also feel that play equipment would be unsafe and lead to accidents. They believe instead that the compound should be made into pitches, or 'slabs' as they are otherwise known (an area of hard-standing to pitch a caravan on) for two more families.

Meanwhile, the several small children who live at Cottingley Springs have to make do with playing in the open streets which run between their pitches. This is not ideal, as there are vehicles of all sorts parked or moving about,

making it a dangerous place to play. Also some of the bigger children, particularly on 'A' site, have quad bikes which they love to ride around the site and in the adjoining field, sometimes without safety helmets, although this is not encouraged. The development plans drawn up with Groundwork include an idea for a scrambling track, although this idea is rather controversial among residents, as it is feared that it may cause noise pollution.

Helen Jones believes the plans would benefit from closer involvement of residents themselves. She told me that the Travellers' Action Group, the 'A' site residents' group, has a constitution and a bank account but needs a lot of support with capacity building to be able to fully engage with the process of improving the site. Her personal view is that one immediate improvement which would be of real value to residents would be to create a walkway between adjacent 'A' and 'B' sites, so that children could visit their friends without needing to walk on the main road. This would also be a comfort to the Traveller parents, for whom children are their greatest and most valued resource, and would help to address their very real sense of isolation and well-founded fears around child safety.

Richard Lancaster, who has been involved with supporting the Travellers and improving the sites, told me that a lot of the problems stem from the isolated location of the site and flaws in its original layout. Richard's role involves supporting a wide range of disadvantaged community groups so there is a limit to how much he can help. He feels that what is needed is a longer term investment of resources specifically dedicated to developing the capacity of the Traveller community and empowering them to create and manage their own facilities. Meanwhile, SLHFA has been able to help in a small way with environmental improvements, which have immediate visual impact.

Residents' Gardens Project

The one area where real headway can be seen is in people's individual gardens. Some project work has been undertaken to help residents landscape their pitches, and where this has been successful, it really does give the site a more attractive look and feel. Assistance has come from various quarters, but much of the work has been done by residents themselves.

During 2003, SLHFA facilitated horticulture workshops with residents of 'A' site, teaching people how to grow plants in pots. This has helped to bring a bit of colour to brighten up the rather overcrowded pitches on 'A' site.

Harjinder Sagoo, Community Link Co-ordinator of Leeds Voice, works with Travellers and also asylum seekers across Leeds, supporting them to tackle various issues including basic skills training, organising drop-in sessions etc. He has helped Cottingley Springs residents to organise trips to restaurants, Christmas parties and so on, and he helps them to raise funds for equipment for improving the gardens. Harjinder has been working behind the scenes in recent years to marshal some support for the Travellers' cause and to organise practical help.

In Spring 2004, Harjinder organised for community service volunteers from the probation service to come and clear away some rubbish on 'B' site and prepare the ground for gardening projects to begin, but apparently there was some tension between the Travellers and the volunteers, which could not be resolved by probation service supervisors (site staff were not on duty as the work took place over the weekend) so they did not complete the work.

South Leeds Health For All then came in and helped with laying turf and adding some garden features to three of the residents' plots, in succession. Richard Lancaster explained that his approach has been to try and involve residents by showing them what can be done. He views the gardening projects as starting point and a way to try and engender interest in caring for and improving the site. He told me that once the first lawn was laid, other residents were very keen to have a garden too.

When I first visited Cottingley in August 2004, the residents still needed 30 tonnes of topsoil and a lot of grass seed – since for subsequent garden it was decided to use seed rather than turf, for some reason. There was some friction and resentment among residents, brought about by the uneven rate of development of different families' gardens. On my second visit in November, the work had progressed a stage further, but some of the Travellers felt disgruntled about the standard of the work, the disruption it has caused in their daily lives, the health and safety risks it has presented, particularly to children, and the hygiene issues which were a serious concern to the women. Others were optimistic that plants would soon begin to thrive come the spring, and more could be added over time.

As with all green space projects, there is an issue over future maintenance. Once the lawns are sown, the site caretaker, Steven Hill, helps some families with their garden maintenance, especially where there is no man in the family, or where a resident has a disability – a very painful, hereditary form of arthritis is very common among Gypsy families. However the maintenance service is already very stretched and this extra help is largely down to the goodwill of the present caretaker.

Getting organised

Each site has a residents' group, but the groups are quite informal and not constituted. 'A' site meet once a fortnight and 'B' site meet once a month. Speakers may be invited from various organisations to give talks at residents meetings. 'B' site residents group invited BEN to join them at their meeting in November 2004, to facilitate a discussion group about their experience of using, improving and creating green spaces.

It is widely appreciated that due to a combination of cultural and lifestyle factors, coupled with shortcomings in the education system, many Travellers lack basic literacy skills. Although many of the residents at Cottingley Springs are unable to read and write, site staff Gillian Thorpe and Gareth Self produce a newsletter once every two months, which they distribute by hand to each

pitch, offering to read the news to residents. They included an item about the BEN visit, to encourage residents to attend the green space discussion. Focus group methodology has to be adapted to be effective with non-literate people. A full report of the 'B' site focus group can be found [here](#).

At time of writing, discussions are underway as to how to arrange for a separate focus group to take place on 'A' site.

As an incentive to encourage people to participate in the focus group, BEN provided a selection of plants from the local garden centre, for people to add to their newly created gardens. On a positive note, Rob Duncan, Garden Centre Manager at B+Q Beeston has pledged to donate half a dozen hanging baskets to brighten up the pitches at Cottingley, in the Spring.

Gillian and Gareth of the Traveller Services Team are pleased to see these small improvements taking place, but are keen to know what serious efforts we can expect to see, as they hope for more significant change in the future.

Looking to the future

Residents of Cottingley have invited Leeds Voice and Groundwork Leeds, together with local councillors, to the next meeting of ROC in January, with a view to moving forward with plans to improve the site. Harjinder is very much hoping that the Travellers will present a unified front and stand together to address the issues facing them all as a community. He feels that it is very important for Travellers to stop arguing among themselves and begin to show some leadership and staying power in their campaign, as for example they have done over the suggestion to introduce CCTV on site. At first people were suspicious and mistrusting of how this would be used, but gradually, opinion leaders within the community have managed to convince others that it would protect them, so now the most residents on the site are backing this idea.

Richard Lancaster believes that short term environmental improvements can act as the catalyst to show people change is possible, but that to bring about more sustainable change would need a change in attitude on both sides, and that takes longer to achieve. He feels the site would benefit from having a dedicated community development worker directly addressing environmental issues with residents over a period of at least a year. He says that it is important to work closely with people on the ground, to develop their skills at the same time as making a lasting difference to the condition of the site.

I asked Helen Jones what she felt was needed to move forward on improving the environment at Cottingley Springs, in the context of issues facing the wider Traveller community. She replied that the site is way too big and badly situated, as there are no facilities in that area. She traces a lot of the problems at Cottingley back to the lack of genuine engagement of Gypsy people in determining their own circumstances. In Helen's opinion, it is unusual to find groups of Travellers of any great size living together. Families

are more likely to keep to themselves, only congregating occasionally, for instance at horse fairs such as Lee Gap in Yorkshire.

She said, “my long term view would be to knock it down and replace it with a network of small, family size sites around Leeds, in places chosen by the families themselves.” But in the mean time, Helen made a commitment to “put weight behind a short term improvement to improve the environmental appearance” of the site, “if it was real and made the residents feel better – but we must be careful to ensure equality”, she added.

Harjinder Sagoo agrees with the idea of a network of smaller scale sites designed by families themselves. He thinks that large Gypsy sites cause concerns for neighbouring Gorgio communities, but that smaller sites “would encourage people to mingle” rather than being “all in one person’s back yard”. He told me that he has lived for 40 years in this country and in this time has developed strong personal relationships with a number of councillors and other influential people, so has been able to secure the support of a number of MPs for the Traveller Reform Bill. He says as a small minority community, Gypsies “are not a vote puller” but that we must seek long term strategies to address the need for more and better Traveller sites, even if only because it would be cheaper than constant evictions. Harjinder’s post at Leeds Voice is secure until 2006 and he hopes within that time scale “to do some real work and have something to show at the end of the day”.

Resources

People living on sites without mains electricity can apply for free solar power kits from the Travellers Aid Trust on 01269 870621 info@travellersaidtrust.org

Other Contacts

Leeds GATE (Gypsy and Traveller Exchange)

This independent community association aims to address members concerns. They have limited resources, but are able to employ a community development worker and an advocacy worker. Contact Helen Jones, Coordinator, tel 0113 234 6556 email Helen-jones@leedsgate.co.uk

Traveller Education Service

Provide support to nursery, primary and secondary age children and their families, whether from Gypsy, Fairground, Circus, New Age, Bargee or other Traveller communities, both in schools and via on-site or roadside facilities. Contact Peter Saunders, Coordinator, or Veronica Keon, Teacher, on 0113 274 8050

Leeds Voice

Community Link Co-ordinator, Harjinder Sagoo, tel 0113 277 2227
harjinder.sagoo@leedsvoice.co.uk

South Leeds Health For All

Richard Lancaster, Community Development Worker, and Karen Emery, Play Worker, tel 0113 270 6903

