

Fear and Uncertainty as Dale Farm Travellers Face Eviction

AP special report by Susan Craig-Greene and Iain Guest

Dale Farm, Essex, UK: A sense of doom has settled over Dale Farm, the largest settlement of Irish Travellers in the UK, as residents prepare themselves for eviction from their homes after six years of stubborn resistance.

The local Basildon Council has given 86 Traveller families until midnight tonight to leave, on the grounds that they have built illegally on protected land known as Green Belt. A last-ditch attempt to halt the eviction failed today, when the High Court in London refused to issue an injunction.

Dale Farm has been a litmus test for Britain's commitment to a multicultural society since June 2005, when the Basildon Council first ordered the Travellers to leave. A succession of adjudicators have upheld the Council's right to evict. But the Travellers and their supporters, including the Advocacy Project (AP), argue that the decision to evict is driven mainly by prejudice and political expediency.

Scores of Traveller families at Dale Farm did in fact receive permission to build before 2005. But this policy was abruptly reversed when the Conservative party won a majority on the Council and began to play to local fears. The influential local newspaper, the *Echo*, has also enflamed opinion against the Travellers and repeatedly denigrated [AP Peace Fellows](#) working at Dale Farm.

The Council has maintained its hard-line policy to the end, by refusing to provide services to Dale Farm, identify vulnerable cases, or even engage the Travellers in a real discussion. "It's like a death sentence," said one resident, Barbara Sheridan. "My sons worry about being bulldozed at night."

Adding to the anxiety, the Council has awarded the eviction contract to Constant, a company that has a history of violent evictions and openly equates Travellers with



Dale Farm resident Nora MacArthy (top left) with Peace Fellow Susan Craig-Greene. Nora's children Mary Ann (left) and Jim (right) have received certificates for their high attendance at the local school. (Photo: Iain Guest)

trespassing [on its website](#).

Susan Craig-Greene, AP's current Peace Fellow at Dale Farm, described the mood at the site on Tuesday as "frantic" with the media present in force, and protesters erecting barriers. The actress Vanessa Redgrave, a long-time supporter of the Travellers, made an eloquent appeal for common sense.

The crisis has prompted a flurry of last-minute international initiatives. Richard Sheridan, the secretary of the Dale Farm Housing Association, flew to Geneva last week to address the UN committee on racial discrimination (CERD) and received a respectful hearing. Two UN human rights rapporteurs, on housing and minorities, [called for a negotiated settlement](#) and Amnesty International also launched a petition to stop the evictions. But this may be too little, too late. With some honorable exceptions, the human rights community has ignored Dale Farm.

Yet an eviction would likely damage the image of the British government. Prime Minister David Cameron has sided with the Basildon Council and agreed to contribute towards the cost of eviction (\$30 million). Many residents are appalled that so much taxpayer money is going to make people homeless at a time of economic hardship. They also see it as an ironic comment on Mr Cameron's "Big Society" and commitment to social inclusion.

Ann Kobayashi, a local Basildon resident who sympathizes with the Travellers, pointed out that several Travellers serve as ministers at the local church and that Dale Farm has given generously to charitable appeals. "They have a strong sense of community" she said.



Environmental hazard: Children play in the ruins of bulldozed Traveller homes (photo Iain Guest, 2008)

homes before they were bulldozed (left). One resident said the pools are attracting rats and threatening the local water supply.

With an eviction, the Basildon Council would instantly become the international face of intolerance and hypocrisy. Although it justifies Traveler evictions as environmental protection, the Council has made no effort to clean up the debris from past evictions. This now poses a clear threat to the environment. Last week, during a visit to Hovefields, near Dale Farm, AP came across several foul-smelling pools which were once Traveller

The Council has made almost no effort to find alternative housing for the 86 Traveller families, as ordered by the English High Court in 2008. Council officials made their first visit to Dale Farm only recently and have reportedly offered a small number of apartments which have been rejected by the Travellers as unsuitable. The Council has also ignored a request to find 62 housing plots ("pitches") for Travellers and Gypsies.

If the evictions go ahead, it seems inevitable that the health and literacy of the Travellers will suffer. Most of the 100 or so Dale Farm children are attending the primary school at Crays Hill - one of the few local schools to provide a nurturing environment for Traveller children. Many are expected to go underground and avoid school if forced out on the road.

AP has supported the Dale Farm Travellers since they were first ordered out in 2005, and Peace Fellow, Susan Craig-Greene has been profiling the Travellers in tweets, blogs and photos. Susan is currently drawing up a list of vulnerable cases for the Dale Farm lawyers. AP hopes to remain connected to the Travellers come what may, and ensure that the British authorities are held to account for their actions in the weeks to come.

- Read the [Dale Farm blog](#)
- Read the [blogs](#) of AP Peace Fellow Susan Craig-Greene
- Read Iain Guest's [2008 blogs](#) on Dale Farm
- Sign Amnesty International's [petition](#) to stop the Dale Farm evictions

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