

## TRAVELER EVICTIONS IN THE UK ARE 'HAZARDOUS TO ENVIRONMENT AND CHILDREN'S HEALTH' CLAIM ADVOCATES

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– A special Advocacy Project investigation

November 1, 2006, Wickford, Essex County, England: The eviction of Travelers and Gypsies by the Basildon District Council is creating a serious environmental and health hazard, particularly to children, according to Traveler families and their advocates.

The concern was voiced during a recent visit by the Advocacy Project (AP) to two Traveler communities, at Hovefields Avenue (Wickford) and Dale Farm. Both are in Essex County, in Southeast England, and under the jurisdiction of the Basildon Council.

Families at Hovefields told AP that children had required medical attention on at least 30 different occasions after playing on a housing plot that was reduced to rubble during an eviction.

AP saw children playing in the abandoned plot next to exposed electric cables, jagged concrete, and a sewage-filled pool that formed when septic tanks were broken up during the eviction. "It is only a matter of time before someone is blinded for life or falls the wrong way," said Martin Doran, one of the Traveler parents. "How in the name of God can this be safe?"

Contacted by AP, Martin Kearney, a planning officer in the council's enforcement office, said that the council has done its best to clear the rubble at Hovefields, but that if "kids are playing there, perhaps their parents should stop them." Grattan Puxon, a long-time advocate for Gypsy and Traveler rights, said that within the community, there is nowhere else for them to play.

Mr. Kearney also added that the council has received a number of complaints about overflowing sewage at Dale Farm and is trying to find out where the sewage is coming from. But, he said, access to the site is hard because of the "poor relations with the community."

Hovefields is one of several flashpoints in a long-running dispute between Travelers and local government authorities in Britain. The site is close to Dale Farm, where 86 Traveler families were almost evicted in July 2005 before the British High Court intervened and suspended any further evictions pending a judicial review.

About 20 families at Hovefields have been denied permission by the council to live in caravans on their own land, which leaves them liable to eviction. Some have secured a temporary legal injunction against eviction, like Dale Farm, but others have no legal protection and could be uprooted at any time.

"They hunted me down," said Christina O'Brien, who moved onto a vacant plot after being evicted with her sick daughter from the property they owned nearby. "Now I'm waiting to be kicked out again. I'm a refugee," she said.

Until now, advocates have focused on the destructive way evictions are carried out by a private company (Constant & Co), under contract from the council. Families showed AP where Constant had used private driveways, destroyed fences, and piled earth around bulldozed plots to prevent families returning to their own property. All of these practices, claimed the families, are illegal.

But Hovefields is also a reminder that an eviction can make life unpleasant for those who remain, and some feel this may even be the council's intention. Mr. Puxon charged that the council is trying to expel Travelers so as to avoid complying with a new national housing law, which will require all councils to find land for Gypsies and Travelers within their boundaries.

The environmental damage is ironic because the council, which has put aside almost three million pounds (\$5.6 million) for evictions, justifies evictions on environmental grounds. The stated goal is to ease development on the "Green Belt," a large strip of land that surrounds London and other cities and is meant to combat urban sprawl.

Several families asked how this squared with the foul-smelling open pit in their midst. They also noted that several of their neighbors, who are not Travelers, have received planning permission. "This is simple discrimination," agreed Mr. Puxon.

In some respects, the Dale Farm families are less vulnerable than those at Hovefields. They recently won a reprieve when the British High Court delayed its judicial review hearing, which was due to start on November 9. They have also developed a unified front in resisting evictions and appealing against the rejection of planning permission. The results of 42 appeals are due to be announced by November 30.

But a permanent solution for Dale Farm still seems far off, and in the meantime the community is becoming increasingly isolated. Non-Traveler children have left the local school and services are deficient. Many of the Traveler mothers are illiterate after years on the road, and younger Traveler women find it almost impossible to find work. All of this, plus the ever-present threat of evictions, makes it harder for the Travelers to integrate into British society while retaining their own culture.

While many minorities in Britain, notably Muslims, are struggling to find the right balance, the Travelers find it particularly difficult to project a positive image of their way of life, even though most have been born in Britain, work hard and are law-abiding.

Their preference would be to work from home for most of the year, and go out on the roads during the summer. But this has become much harder in Britain following the passage of the 1996 Criminal Justice Act, which toughens the penalties for trespassing. Many traveling men now take their caravans to the continent and follow their trades in France, Germany and Spain.

Forced to rely on themselves, the Travelers of Dale Farm have organized a defense and become effective advocates. The Dale Farm community association has about 80 paying members, and a growing number of the older women are attending literacy classes.

Kathleen McCarthy, vice chair of the association and a governor of the local school, said that her own confidence has grown as she has become more active. "It's taken us a long time to realize that we're as good as anyone else," she said.

AP has monitored the Dale Farm confrontation at the request of the UK Association of Gypsy Women (UKAGW), an AP partner. An AP intern, Lynne Engelman from Calgary University, spent part of the summer with the UKAGW.

- Read [Lynne's blog](#) (UK Association of Gypsy Women).
- Read more about [Dale Farm](#).