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TRAVELLER COMMUNITY CENTER AT DALE FARM THREATENED BY DEMOLITION AS EVICTION THREAT RESURFACES



Basildon, UK: Local authorities are threatening to demolish a community center built by the Dale Farm Travellers, creating new tensions as the long-running eviction battle over Dale Farm heads back to the law courts.

The Saint Christopher's Centre, which opened in May, has become the latest target of the Basildon Council as the Council seeks to remove about 90 Traveller families from their homes in Southeastern England.

"They're turning up the terror to make us leave," said Richard Sheridan, president of the Dale Farm Housing Association.

The Council voted twice, in 2005 and 2007, to evict the Travellers, claiming they are living illegally and without planning permission at Dale Farm. Those eviction orders were halted in May this year by Judge Andrew Collins, on the British High Court. The judge ordered the Council to find alternative land where the Travellers could live. The Council has appealed his ruling, and a hearing is scheduled for Dec. 5 in the Appeals Court.

Meanwhile, the Travellers are also seeking an injunction, and a judicial review, to stop the demolition of Saint Christopher's, according to Grattan Puxon, secretary of the Dale Farm Housing Association.

The Advocacy Project has worked with the Dale Farm Housing Association since 2005, and supported the Travellers in their struggle against eviction.

The Saint Christopher's Centre was built for the children of Dale Farm, many of whom do not attend local schools for fear of prejudice. Computers have been installed in the centre to allow for information technology (IT) instruction, and courses in photography and dressmaking were due to start this month. The center is also used by Dale Farm Chaveys Youth Club, which provides the children with leadership training, and for prayer meetings which are held every Tuesday.

Despite a last minute plea by Lord Eric Avebury, a member of Britain's House of Lords, and a report to the Essex Racial Equality Commission, the Basildon Council voted last Tuesday (September 16) to close down Saint Christopher's, claiming it was built in breach of the district's planning regulations. Children from the Chaveys Youth Club protested outside the closed meeting, but were refused admission to plead their case.

The Travellers contend that their centre, a log cabin, did not need a permit because it was built adjacent to an existing dwelling. The dispute is further complicated by the fact that the centre was funded and is owned by the governmental Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). The Essex County Council (ECC), the regional authority, distributed the funding. Officials from the DCSF and the ECC did not respond to inquiries from the Advocacy Project.

The threat to Saint Christopher's compounds the stress on Traveller families, who are increasingly worried at the possibility that they will lose the forthcoming appeal, and that the eviction will be allowed to proceed. According to Mr Puxon, the Council has set aside about \$5 million to bulldoze Dale Farm and destroy more than 130 chalets, mobile-homes and caravans. They include the trailer home of a young mother expecting triplets.

In recent weeks, families have also been alerted to a plan to take Traveller children into temporary government care in the event of an eviction. Parents are concerned that the process could be traumatic for children and that they could be left homeless and unable to get their children back. They are even afraid that officials may force them to leave the county in order to get their children back.

In a September 19 meeting, the ECC confirmed that welfare workers could not seize children without a court order, but said police could do so on the authority of the chief constable. A follow-up meeting is planned between the ECC and Dale Farm parents in the near future, and a meeting with the chief constable is also being sought.

- Learn more about the [Dale Farm Housing Association](#)
- See a [timeline](#) of the Dale Farm crisis