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Dear Alf,

Thank you for your letter of 13 January to Brandon Lewis MP, following up the Government's responses to the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly's October 2014 report on *Travellers, Gypsies and Roma: access to public services and community relations*. As Minister with responsibility for these matters, I am responding to those of your questions which fall within the remit of my Department.

In answer to your question about the Traveller Pitch Fund, I can confirm that this fund was administered by the Homes and Communities Agency and ran from 2011 to 2015. Between 2011 and 2015, the Traveller Pitch Funding programme spent £42 million to deliver 463 new, and 332 refurbished pitches, in England. The Traveller Pitch Funding programme is now closed.

Funding for new traveller pitches in England is now provided through the Affordable Homes Programme. This is a competitive programme which allocates funding after assessing bids for value for money and deliverability.

While there is now no separate funding for the provision of traveller pitches, these are legitimate forms of affordable housing that can be included in bids. Assessment of bids for traveller pitch funding is undertaken in line with the assessment criteria outlined above, on an equal basis as other bids. The assessment also takes into account that there may be instances where a particular scheme, for example in a rural location or a traveller pitch which needs utilities provision or new access, involves higher costs than the average for the bidder or area. Wherever possible, the assessment will seek to take account of genuine comparators (such as other rural or traveller pitch schemes) and may seek further information from the bidder to understand whether there are genuine reasons for higher costs or grant requirements.

The Government conducts a biannual count of traveller caravans in England. The results of the July 2015 count were published in November 2015 and they show that there were 21,094 traveller caravans in England at that time. 17,951 were on authorised sites (compared with

16,694 in July 2014). Of these, 11,478 were on privately funded sites and 6,473 were on socially rented sites.

The number of caravans on unauthorised developments (i.e. on land owned by travellers without planning permission) was 1,932 (compared with 1,982 in July 2014). The number of caravans on unauthorised encampments (i.e. on land not owned by travellers) was 1,201 (compared with 1,282 in July 2014). We are concerned about the upset and disruption caused by unauthorised sites and we have introduced a range of measures to help local councils take immediate action against such sites. In March 2015, Ministers wrote to all council leaders, chief constables and police and crime commissioners in England to remind them of the powers available to them to deal with unauthorised sites. I note the report's suggestion that local authorities should make efforts to signpost services available to residents of unauthorised sites, but there is a risk that this may inadvertently put such sites on a semi-official basis and prolong their duration. We believe it is better that local authorities should take swift action to prevent unauthorised sites happening in the first place.

In answer to your question about whether the Government plans to introduce a statutory duty on local authorities in England to provide sites, I can confirm that we do not believe it is necessary or desirable to introduce such a duty. It is already incumbent on local authorities to objectively assess traveller needs and to identify a suitable five-year supply of sites to meet those needs. Once sites have been identified, they can be developed by travellers themselves or agents acting on their behalf. We believe it right that local authorities be free to decide for themselves (balancing competing priorities) the extent to which they wish to provide sites themselves. Similarly, it would be for local authorities to develop regional strategies covering housing, health and education but we would expect these to meet the needs of all of the community.

Finally, you may be interested to know that my Department hosts quarterly meetings of a Gypsy, Traveller and Roma Liaison Group, which brings together organisations representing these communities to discuss issues of concern. The agenda items are proposed by the organisations themselves and my Department invites the relevant government officials to the meetings to discuss these issues with the Gypsy, Traveller and Roma representatives. We have not received any representations regarding in-community conflict resolution or mediation, but would be happy to consider this if proposed by the representative organisations. Recent topics of discussion have included changes to planning policy, European structural funds, hate crime and the Scrap Metal Dealers Act.

*Best wishes,
Sue*

BARONESS WILLIAMS OF TRAFFORD