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Dear Thomas,

Thank you for your letter of 13 February about the provision of sites for travellers. The UK shares your views on the importance of ensuring the human rights of all and we have a strong and effective legal framework which protects the human rights of all individuals, and protects everyone, including Gypsies and Travellers, from discrimination. I welcome this opportunity to outline the measures we are taking to improve the situation of Gypsies and Travellers and in particular in relation to the provision of traveller sites.

We agree that a shortfall of appropriate sites continues to be a problem in many areas, but the imposition of top-down targets through the regional strategy approach, which you mention in your letter, has failed to resolve this issue. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of caravans on unauthorised developments increased from 728 to 2395. Local authorities are best placed to assess the needs of their communities and so we are placing responsibility for site provision back with them.

Rather than imposing top-down targets which fuelled opposition to development, we are offering councils real incentives to develop additional traveller sites in their area. We are providing £60 million in England up until 2015 to help local authorities and other registered providers provide new and refurbished traveller sites in consultation with local communities. Successful bids totalling £47 million were announced on 5<sup>th</sup> January, which will help provide over 750 new and refurbished pitches for travellers, and will, in turn, help to reduce the number of unauthorised sites, which create tensions between travellers and the settled community. The Homes and Communities Agency will continue to consider new bids for the remaining £13 million. Local authorities will also be given incentives through the New Homes Bonus scheme to deliver new housing, including traveller sites.

We are also providing £50,000 to support a training programme by the Local Government Improvement and Development Agency to raise awareness amongst local councillors of their leadership role in relation to traveller site provision and planning applications for sites. To help address hostility towards site development proposals, work is underway to compile evidence demonstrating how small family-owned sites are normally well presented, with family ownership providing a clear motivation for maintaining them in good order.

Our overall objective is the fair and effective provision of authorised sites for travellers. We are committed to encouraging sustainable development and it is important the local authorities plan for the needs of their communities, including Travellers. However, we will not tolerate abuse of the planning system by anyone. We want to see fair play in the planning system, with everyone being treated equally and evenhandedly. We published our draft new planning policy for traveller sites for full public consultation last year. The draft policy aimed to be short, light touch and fair, put the provision of sites back into the hands of local councils, in consultation with local communities, and protect Green Belt land. We are currently considering all the responses to the consultation and intend to publish our new policy as soon as possible.

The unauthorised traveller site at Dale Farm was the subject of an exhaustive legal process, including consideration of human rights issues, and extension of the compliance period to two years to allow occupiers to find alternative accommodation. The clearance process was a matter for Basildon District and its partner agencies and was very much a last step in seeking to regularise development of the site. Through this process there have been opportunities to have the planning merits of the unlawful development considered by the local authority, to have those merits reconsidered through appeals and to test the lawfulness of the process through judicial review. These opportunities were taken. The unacceptability of the development was confirmed during the legal process and extensions given to the time for compliance. We understand that the local authority urged any occupant who did not have alternative accommodation to make a homelessness application.

As you know, we are also taking action to address the wider inequalities experienced by Gypsies and Travellers in England. At the end of 2010, I set up a Ministerial Working Group to look at ways to tackle the poor social outcomes faced by Gypsies and Travellers in areas such as health, education, accommodation and the criminal justice system. The Ministerial Working Group will publish a progress report shortly and I will ensure that you are sent a copy.

Finally, as your mandate is coming to an end, I would like to take this opportunity to wish you all the best for the future.

Yours ever  
Eric

**THE RT HON ERIC PICKLES MP**