

## ERIC AVEBURY : SPEECH ON OPENING DALE FARM COMMUNITY CENTRE

First, may I thank Richard and his committee for inviting me to join you on this very important occasion, and I'm delighted to join you and have this opportunity of saying a few words about the problems faced by Travellers in the South-East, and in Basildon in particular.

As you may know, this is the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Caravan Sites Act, which made local authorities provide sites for Gypsies and Travellers living in their area. The Act was beginning to make some impact by the nineties, but it was repealed in 1994 without substituting any alternative means of ensuring that accommodation was available. Then in 2003 two new Acts were passed. The first required local authorities to make an assessment of the accommodation needs of Travellers in their area, and the second created a framework to ensure that the necessary land was designated under the planning system.

The needs assessments have now been completed, and it's the job of regional planning bodies to translate them into land allocations in every local authority area.

In the East of England Region, this process was completed and the results submitted to the Government in February. There is a 12-week period of consultation on the draft policy ending on May 15, and anybody can submit views on the numbers. The number of additional pitches for which land has to be allocated in the region as a whole is 1,187, of which Basildon is to provide 81. The timescale is that the land for these extra pitches is to be designated by 2011. It's not for me to say whether that's the right number, though I note that there were 208 unauthorised pitches in Basildon at the last count. If there isn't any change in the numbers, that means that Dale Farm would be reduced to a bit over a third of its present

size, but that means the neighbours like Thurrock would have to accommodate some of the 127 caravans to be moved out of Basildon.

Of course, the Dale Farm unauthorised development wouldn't be here if planning permissions had been given on enough land in other parts of the region for the numbers of Gypsies and Travellers needing them.

Travellers have made considerable efforts to develop sites of their own, but up to this point the planning system has thwarted them. Once the RSS has been agreed, and local authorities allocate the land, the situation will become a lot easier, both for the Travellers themselves, and for local residents living in houses who object to unauthorised encampments in their neighbourhood.

It has to be recognised also that Dale Farm wouldn't be as large as it is if it weren't for repeated evictions in other parts of the South East, where families living on their own land without planning permission have been forced to move away, and have sought refuge here.

As you don't need me to remind you, Ruth Kelly, as Secretary of State at CLG, upheld Basildon's decision to evict the residents of Dale Farm, in spite of the Government's own guidance on enforcement, which says that it is more effective when there is authorised provision within the area, a point that's echoed by the Independent Task Group on Site Provision and Enforcement

If it comes to that and a local authority does evict people when there is nowhere else for them to go, they become homeless and the local authority is responsible for rehousing them under the Homelessness Act. In addition to the £3 million cost of the evictions and bulldozing the

site, the public, as local and national tax payers, will face a much higher charge in dealing with not only the cost of providing families with emergency accommodation, but also in providing services for the children. And for years downstream of eviction, there will be costs in terms of additional social and health services, and higher payments of benefits to the young people and children whose future earning potential will be impaired if not extinguished by the traumatic experience.

Travellers already suffer the lowest life expectancy; the highest child mortality rate, and the worst educational attainment of any ethnic group, and kicking them off this site would push vulnerable people further downhill.

The local authority has partly conceded all this, in promising that it would

- Appoint a liaison officer who will issue eviction fact packs – *you can't live in facts, or eat them*
- Seek out – *but not find, an impossibility in Essex for the time being* - legal sites for families
- Provide temporary accommodation and urgently deal with homeless applications – *where is it?*
- Find school places and ensure transport is provided where needed – *where are the schools with places to spare, and what's the budget for the extra transport?*
- Help travellers register with GPs and ensure they have enough prescription drugs – *where are the GPs with spare capacity, and are they in the places where the council is planning to dump the families?*
- Introduce families to religious leaders – *fortunately, the Travellers are already well and effectively supported by the Church, but if there are*

*other churches ready to defend the poor and vulnerable as Jesus did, let them come forward now.*

But the advice from as far afield as Washington DC is 'Don't do it'. The penalty will extend beyond the human suffering of a small and helpless minority to enormous damage to our reputation around the world as a tolerant and civilised society.

This Community Centre is therefore more than a simple and modest amenity, that will help the people of Dale Farm to make a little progress with their lives, particularly in terms of the educational facilities it offers the children. It is all of that, but its also a symbol representing the ambitions of civilised people like those who serve on the Essex Racial Equality Council, who are to be warmly congratulated on their initiative. It demonstrates that beyond whatever argument there may be about the merits of Dale Farm in planning terms, we are determined to see that the gross disadvantage of the Gypsy and Traveller community is eliminated. Five leading international human rights organisations have identified the proposed evictions as among a number of 'serial abuses' of Travellers in Europe, and that admirable judge who so frequently defends everybody's civil liberties has said that forced evictions with the use of bailiffs could be a thing of the past. So this Centre is a beacon of hope, not just for the families on this site, but for a better deal for a few thousand Traveller people all round Britain whose basic right to a home is always under threat, and to the silent majority of tolerant and humane citizens who are determined to maintain this country as the pillar of freedom it has always been.