

11th October 2021

Address Redacted

Email: [Redacted](#)

Dear Sir

Complaint of alleged contravention by North Norfolk District Council of Race Relations Act 1968

I refer to your letter dated 27th September 2021 concerning the above and note the contents therein.

The substantive issue of your complaint appears to be the District Council's decision, following a large unauthorised encampment and anti-social behaviour by a group of Gypsies and Travellers visiting Cromer in August 2017; to install height barriers at some of its coastal car parks, **which can be operated or closed at the request of police colleagues**, to minimise future unauthorised encampments in the future; and whether such action is a constitutes discrimination against a defined group of people.

I advise that it isn't clear from your complaint as to whether you are raising this issue in a personal capacity, having tried to access the Council's car parks; are representing a group of people (members of the Gypsy and Traveller community) who believe they have suffered or experienced discrimination through the Council's actions or policies; or otherwise have seen reporting on a local issue through the national media. I believe however that it would be helpful for the Council to understand your interest in this matter, such that an appropriate response can be provided to you. In the absence of such understanding I would comment in respect of the issues you have raised as follows:-

North Norfolk District Council does not believe that the provision of height restriction barriers on a small number of its public car parks to prevent unauthorised occupation by Gypsies and Travellers represents discrimination or contravention of the Race Relations Act 1968 as is suggested in your complaint.

The District Council provides public car parks in its market and coastal towns for the purposes of supporting the local economy – ie vibrant town centres as centres of employment shopping, business and personal services and leisure visits; and meeting the needs of tourist visitors visiting local beaches, promenade areas and related attractions, eating places etc. The car parks provided by the authority, and the bye-laws which apply to such assets, are detailed in the North Norfolk Car Park Order 2012 (as amended). **The bye-laws do permit overnight parking of vehicles for use by local residents who do not have private parking or by people staying in local guest houses or self-catering accommodation without private parking, but do not allow any overnight sleeping or camping in vehicles.**

Gypsies and Travellers have visited North Norfolk over many years for seasonal work, taking holidays or pilgrimage to the shrines at Walsingham. Whilst the majority of these visits were without issue, historically some visits involved unauthorised encampments being established on District Council car parks, playing fields, common land and on highway verges, which often generated community tensions.

In response to these events and to comply with legislation contained within the 2004 Housing Act, in 2007 /2008 North Norfolk District Council undertook a process of extensive community engagement on proposals to provide facilities for Gypsies and Travellers visiting North Norfolk. Two dedicated Temporary Stopping Place facilities, at Cromer and Fakenham, were provided with the support of Government funding. Each of these facilities, which are managed by the District Council, has 10 surfaced pitches served by an internal site roadway and where temporary toilet and waste facilities can be provided when the sites are occupied, thereby providing a safe environment for the travelling community, reflective of the seasonal and short- term nature of visits to North Norfolk. Since the provision of these facilities in 2010/11, community tensions around visits to North Norfolk by the travelling community have been significantly reduced such that their provision and operation is widely recognised as a success in community cohesion terms.

The only exception to this strategy was an event in August 2017 when a group of some 23 Gypsy and Traveller caravans occupied the Ronton Road Car Park in Cromer and caused significant issues of anti-social behaviour in the town. The scale of this event was extensively reported in local and national media and resulted in the Norfolk Constabulary and Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Norfolk attending a high profile public meeting in the town and undertaking a review of the Constabulary's response to the incident. The "learning" from this incident was for there to be increased local partnership working in managing visits of Gypsies and Travellers to North Norfolk, including "target-hardening" of some public car parks to restrict unauthorised use / occupation based on local intelligence, such that legitimate and authorised use of the car parks could be protected in support of the wider local economy. Such a position was supported through the Council's previous positive provision of Stopping Place facilities for Gypsies and Travellers visiting the District – such that the decision to install height barriers at some coastal public car parks, which could be "closed" based on intelligence related to the movement of Gypsy and Travellers within Norfolk, was seen as an appropriate and proportionate response to managing an issue which in the height of the summer season could impact upon the local economy, individual businesses and community events.

Height restriction barriers were therefore installed on five coastal or resort car parks provided by the District Council – these being at Ronton Road; Cadogan Road and The Meadow in Cromer; Station Approach, Sheringham and Stearmans Yard, Wells-next-the-Sea. Two other car parks operated by the District Council also have fixed height barriers for operational or reasons specified in the Council's lease of land so as to provide a car park – these are at East Ronton (restricting access to approximately half of the car park (grassed area) and a new car park provided in 2020 at Bacton.

With regards the five car parks which have height restriction barriers which can be "closed" at the request of the police based on intelligence about the movement of Gypsies and Travellers within Norfolk, restricted access to these car parks is limited to just a few days of the year – ie there is unrestricted access for most of the time – ie an average of 350 days per year.

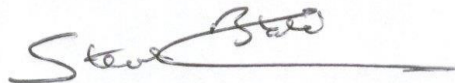
With the COVID pandemic over the past two summer seasons, the North Norfolk District has seen very large numbers of staycation visitors, an increasing number of whom have visited in motorhomes and campervans. The Council has received representations from the owners of such vehicles and the Campaign for Real Aires that overnight parking / sleeping should be permitted on its car parks; however the Council does not believe this is appropriate for a number of reasons. These include the fact that the district has a very large number of authorised camping sites – including over 100 certified locations with just five pitches to large commercial sites with leisure facilities, bars and restaurants – therefore catering for a very diverse range of preferences which the Council believes it is unfair to undermine given the investment made in facilities by these businesses; issues of amenity for local residents adjoining public car parks and the costs involved to Council Tax payers in providing additional facilities for motorhome owners such as the provision of water and waste facilities. The District Council has not therefore agreed to revise its Car Park Order or bye-laws to permit overnight camping or sleeping on any of its public car parks by any groups of people or individuals – ie the regulations within the bye-laws apply equally and cannot therefore be seen as discriminating or disadvantaging any group or community, in the way you have suggested.

In terms of the wider accessibility of its public car parks, North Norfolk District Council operates some 25 public car parks – the majority of which serve town centres and are surfaced and with marked spaces; whilst a number of others, all of which are in coastal locations are grassed areas where parking is more informal. All are surface car parks – ie none are underground or multi-storey. This means that in general there are no height restrictions limiting access to motorhomes or vehicles with roof-racks or roof-boxes and indeed five car parks also accommodate coach parking and two accommodate markets on some days of the week, such that they are accessible by HGVs. However, what we have seen this summer with large numbers of motorhome visitors is that some town centre car park layouts with marked bays present some difficulties in terms of turning space for larger or long vehicles such that we did issue advice as to car parks which could more easily accommodate parking of motorhomes – ie on to car parks where parking was more informal with more space for parking and turning. All of the District Council's surfaced and marked car parks have dedicated accessible parking for Blue Badge holders with wider spaces to allow access by wheelchairs etc, in line with legislative requirements. The majority of the Council's car parks also have public toilets on or in close proximity to the car parks, albeit they are not open 24/7 due to issues experienced with anti-social behaviour. Toilets provided at the Temporary Stopping Places are for the exclusive use of occupiers of these facilities.

I note that in making your complaint to the District Council you state that you believe the Council's use of height barriers in the management of its car parks is discriminatory. The District Council does not agree with this position for the reasons outlined above and would further comment that many car parks operated by local authorities and private sector operators do not allow unrestricted or open access to all vehicle users – many underground, multi-storey or shopping centre car parks cannot accommodate motorhomes or other high or indeed long vehicles, many restrict access by vehicles towing trailers etc

.I hope the above addresses the concerns raised in your correspondence, but please do come back to me if you wish to discuss further.

Yours faithfully



**Steve Blatch - BA (Hons), DipTP,
MRTPI, DMS CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

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