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Dear Tom,

0 5 JAN 2016

Thank you for your letter of 15 December to Brandon Lewis MP regarding a clause in the Housing and Planning Bill. I am replying as this falls within my Ministerial responsibilities.

The Government wants a fair planning system, in which everyone is treated equally and even-handedly, and where decisions on development and enforcement action are taken at the local level wherever possible. The Government's overarching aim is to ensure fair and equal treatment for Travellers - whatever their race or origin - in a way that facilitates their traditional and nomadic way of life while respecting the interests of the settled community.

The provisions in the Housing and Planning Bill do not seek to remove the obligation to assess the accommodation needs of Gypsies and Travellers. Instead, they include the assessment of the needs of those who reside in or resort to the area - with respect to the provision of caravan sites and moorings for houseboats - irrespective of their cultural traditions or whether they have ever had a nomadic habit of life. The clause seeks to remove the perception that because Gypsies and Travellers have specific mention in legislation they somehow receive more favourable treatment. We want local authorities to assess the needs of their communities as a whole and our clause emphasises that Gypsies and Travellers are not separate members of our communities. Local housing authorities will be able to consider how best to assess that need, whether as a whole or by providing individual assessments for specific groups of people.

The Government wishes to see an increase in the supply of Traveller sites. In much the same way as we expect councils to plan to meet the needs of their settled community, our Planning Policy for Traveller Sites sets out that local authorities should objectively assess their Traveller needs and identify a suitable five-year supply of sites to meet these, taking account of national planning policy in doing so. Up to 31 March 2015, a total of 463 new, and 332 refurbished, pitches were delivered under the 2011 -15 Traveller Pitch Funding programme. Funding for new traveller pitches is now provided through the 2015 - 18 Affordable Homes Programme.

Williams of Trafford

BARONESS WILLIAMS OF TRAFFORD