

## Living in Seaside Caravans

### New survey evidence and the implications for local authority funding

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#### Summary

Modern 'static' caravans increasingly provide a viable alternative to conventional bricks-and-mortar housing. New survey evidence from the Lincolnshire coast, which is reputed to have the largest concentration of static caravans in Europe, confirms that substantial numbers of people now live for most or all of the year in seaside caravans. Mostly this is a positive choice rather than a 'second best' option, and it is a lifestyle that is well-regarded by the individuals concerned. However, there is also evidence that most of these people go unrecorded for official purposes – for Council Tax, on the electoral register, and in local population data for example. This matters because so many public sector funding formulas are population-driven, and as a result seaside local authorities are systematically under-funded.

Key words: Caravans, seaside, Lincolnshire, residents, population, funding.

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#### Introduction

'Static' caravans are these days a long way removed from the small caravans (or 'tourers') that are towed from place to place behind family cars. They are very much larger for a start, and they are not really intended to be moved. They are mobile homes only in the sense that they are factory-made and stand on a chassis with wheels and/or fixed supports. In fact, many static caravans most closely resemble bungalows and they are connected to mains utilities in just the same way as bricks-and-mortar housing.

Over the last twenty years or so, the improvements in the design and build quality of static caravans have been considerable, to the extent to which living in a caravan has become an increasingly practical proposition. In many coastal areas, where so many caravans are concentrated, there is a widely held view that this is now happening, but there has hitherto been a complete lack of reliable evidence.

This article presents evidence from Lincolnshire, on the east coast of England, an area that is reputed to have the largest concentration of static caravans in Europe. It draws principally on a survey of caravan residents and on interviews with key players in the local area, such as caravan site owners and the local authority<sup>1</sup>. The findings are potentially of importance far beyond Lincolnshire because the evidence shows not only that large numbers of people are now living in caravans but also that they largely go unrecorded for official purposes. This rebounds on coastal local authorities because their population is systematically under-recorded and, as a result, they receive less in government grants than would otherwise be the case.

## The information gap

There has previously been remarkably little research into Britain's seaside caravan residents.

The two most significant government-sponsored reports are a survey of mobile home residents (Niner and Hughes, 1992) and a report on the economics of the park homes industry (Berkeley Hanover Consulting, 2002). In the present context, the limitation of both these reports is that they cover a rather different segment of the industry to the one typically found along the coast. Both cover mobile homes that have permission for all-year-round occupation – or 'park homes' as they are generally known. In contrast, the vast majority of the caravan sites along the coast, in Lincolnshire for example, usually have planning conditions that limit their occupancy to only part of the year. Park homes are also covered by different legislation to caravan sites. This makes it hard to 'read across' from research on park homes to caravan sites more generally.

Beyond these two official studies there is little literature in the UK context, in contrast to the much greater volume in the United States where living in trailers and mobile homes is widely recognised as an important phenomenon. A more recent study of park home residents (Bevan, 2009), based on in-depth interviews, largely confirms the findings of the 1992 survey. An article on caravan residents in East Yorkshire (Zennor and Allison, 2010) finds that they suffer from high rates of poor health and limiting long-term illness.

Two recent reports for the Department for Communities and Local Government (Beatty, Fothergill and Wilson, 2008, 2011) do however fuel suspicions that significant numbers may now be living in caravans along the coast, especially in Lincolnshire. Both studies assembled a wide range of socio-economic data for England's seaside towns. The Lincolnshire coast stood out as an area of high deprivation but also, unusually for an area of deprivation, as an area of continuing population growth. That the area's caravans may be attracting residents from outside the area, especially those on benefits, was one of the possibilities flagged up in the second report.

## A new survey

Between mid-March and early April 2011 the present authors carried out a major survey of caravan and chalet residents along the Lincolnshire coast.

The timing of the survey was chosen to maximise the focus on *long-term residents*. Nearly all the caravan sites on the Lincolnshire coast operate within planning conditions that require them to be unoccupied for several weeks in winter. Typically, sites are required to be closed from immediately after New Year to the beginning of

March or, in other cases, from the end of October or November through to the beginning of March. The start of the survey was timed for a few days after the sites re-opened. The survey was completed just before the beginning of the Easter school holidays, when sites normally begin to fill with short-term visitors and holidaymakers.

The survey was carried out on twelve sites, varying in terms of location, size, ownership and the segment of the market they occupy. One of the sites comprised chalets rather than caravans, and while the majority of the twelve sites had planning conditions requiring closure in January and February, one had all-year-round opening and the others were closed from the end of November to the beginning of March. There is no way of being certain that the twelve survey sites are fully representative of all the caravan and chalet sites along the Lincolnshire coast. However, the number and diversity of the sites gives confidence.

All the interviews were carried out face-to-face<sup>2</sup>, usually in the resident's caravan or chalet, using a tightly structured questionnaire. The residents were contacted by door-knocking and up to three call-backs at different times of day were carried out. In one location, site workers who were caravan residents were contacted with the assistance of the management. All the interviews took place during the working week so as to avoid weekends when there might be short-term visitors on site. Interviews typically lasted 20 minutes. Residents could decline to take part but in practice the proportion opting out was low.

The survey targeted long-term residents rather than temporary visitors. All the interviewees were therefore first asked whether they "*live here some or all of the year or are just a short-term visitor, weekend resident or on holiday*". The survey interview only proceeded with those who said they lived on the site for some or all of the year.

The interviews were normally carried out with a single individual but covered the household as a whole. In all, interviews with 374 households, accounting for 707 people, were completed.

## Survey findings

A report setting out the full findings of the Lincolnshire survey has been published separately (Beatty, Fothergill, Powell and Scott, 2011).

Some of the survey statistics confirm what has long been known anecdotally about caravan residents – that they are a predominantly older group:

- nearly three-quarters are over 55, and more than 40 per cent over 65
- over 60 per cent describe themselves as 'retired'
- fewer than a quarter have a job – and this low figure includes a number of site workers for whom the caravan came with the job.

What is less well known, perhaps, is the extent to which living in a caravan for some or all of the year is a positive choice:

- more than 80 per cent of survey respondents cited 'liked the local environment' and 'liked the way of living' as reasons for opting for a caravan
- by contrast, only 12 per cent said they 'couldn't afford anything else' and only three per cent that they live in a caravan because they couldn't get a council house.

The households surveyed spend a large proportion of the year living in a caravan:

- 85 per cent live on site for at least three months of the year
- over 40 per cent live on site at least nine months of the year.

These are high proportions, bearing in mind that planning conditions require all but one of the sites to close for a minimum of two months of the year. There is also no evidence that these occupancy rules are systematically flouted. The vast majority (83 per cent) own their caravan outright, and a further five per cent are buying with the aid of a mortgage.

The commitment to continuing to live in a caravan is also considerable:

- 79 per cent say they expect to continue living on site for part or all of the year for the foreseeable future
- 84 per cent of those expecting to remain say this is because they are 'happy living here'
- only two per cent of those expecting to stay say this is because they can't afford to move elsewhere.

In the case of the Lincolnshire coast, the vast majority of caravan residents come from the area's traditional tourist hinterland in the industrial North and Midlands.

A key observation from the survey data is that there is a blurred distinction between 'visitors' and 'residents'. Naively, it might be assumed that caravan occupants can be divided neatly into two groups: those that live there all year round and those who are temporary visitors or holidaymakers. This isn't the case. In practice, the modern static caravan provides a congenial environment in which some people can spend extended periods even if they have a principal home elsewhere. In effect, the caravan or chalet functions as a second home rather like a cottage in the country. Some people live multi-centred lives and this can be especially true of retirees, who make up a high proportion of site residents.

Notwithstanding the blurred distinction between visitors and residents, there is nevertheless a sizeable group of caravan occupants who should unquestionably be regarded as local residents, who deserve to be included in all measures of the local population on the same basis as occupants of conventional bricks-and-mortar housing. They make up around 40 per cent of all the caravan residents covered by the Lincolnshire survey. A number of key statistics point to this proportion. Amongst the survey respondents:

- 41 per cent live on site for nine months or more each year
- 43 per cent don't return to another home elsewhere for part of the year
- 39 per cent consider their caravan or chalet to be their main home
- 39 per cent are permanently registered with a GP at the caravan's address
- 43 per cent are not registered to vote elsewhere
- 39 per cent normally use a postal address at their caravan site.

This proportion – 40 per cent of all non-short term visitors – applies to the weeks in March and early April when the survey was carried out. As a proportion of all occupants on site, including short-term visitors, the figure will of course be lower, especially during

peak holiday periods. There is clear evidence here, nonetheless, of a sizeable community living most or all of the time in seaside caravans.

### How many residents?

But just *how many* people can be described as ‘living in a caravan’? Grossing up the survey results to provide estimates for the Lincolnshire coast as a whole is an imprecise science.

The starting point in any calculation has to be the completion of 374 interviews on twelve sites that include, in total, just over 4,000 static caravans or chalets. The completed interviews do not represent the sum total of resident households on the sites: there was no contact with some households despite call-backs and, as in all surveys, a small number of refusals. In addition, on several of the larger sites the interviewing was halted once a pre-defined quota had been met. On four of the twelve survey sites, for example, the completed interviews represented more than 20 per cent of the stock of static caravans but on each of these sites there remained scope for additional interviews. In two other cases where the site was open from March to early January the interviewing was stopped well short of the 20 per cent mark.

A further complication is that the survey included a high proportion of sites that are allowed to open for large parts of the year, typically all but January and February, on the reasonable assumption that long-term caravan residents are most likely to be found there rather than on sites that are only allowed to open during the summer months. Fewer interviews, in relation to the number of static caravans, were completed on the survey sites that were only allowed to open from March to November.

Local authority records indicate that the 24,700 static caravans and chalets along the Lincolnshire coast<sup>3</sup> fall into five groups in terms of permitted opening:

All year round	700 units (3% of the total)
March to early January	5,200 units (21%)
March to end November	10,200 units (41%)
March to end/mid October	6,100 units (25%)
No information	2,400 units (10%)

Bearing in mind the data on the number of completed interviews on each site in relation to the stock of caravans, and the permitted opening on each of the sites, a number of bold assumptions about the Lincolnshire coast seem justified:

- that 30 per cent of the units on sites that are open for ten months or more a year are occupied by long-term residents
- that 15 per cent of the units on sites open between March and November are occupied by long-term residents
- that there are no long-term residents on the March to October sites
- that on the sites for which there is no recorded information on occupancy dates, 10 per cent of the units are occupied by long-term residents.

‘Long-term resident’ means the same here as in the survey – households that live on the site for some or all of the year, rather than short-term visitors, weekend residents or holidaymakers.

The resulting estimates suggest that around 3,500 households may be long-term residents in the caravans and chalets along the Lincolnshire coast. At the average occupancy rate identified by the survey (1.9 persons per unit) these caravan and chalet households will account for around 6,600 people. Also in line with the survey findings, some 40 per cent of these residents – that is, around 1,400 households and perhaps 2,700 people – should really be regarded as full-time local residents and counted as such.

Moving beyond Lincolnshire to consider the rest of the coast takes us into the realm of informed speculation. Lincolnshire may lay claim to the biggest single concentration of static caravans but it is not unique in having large numbers. Caravans are a major component of the stock of holiday accommodation in many places along the UK coast. There are notable concentrations in East Yorkshire, North Norfolk, in the Great Yarmouth area, on the Isle of Sheppey, near Porthcawl and Rhyl in Wales, and more generally in a whole host of places along the South and South West coasts, not to mention in close proximity to major resorts such as Blackpool and Scarborough. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the processes at work in Lincolnshire, whereby higher-quality static caravans are becoming essentially full-time residences, also apply in other places.

If we assume, for the sake of argument, that Lincolnshire's caravans represent five per cent of the UK stock of static caravans around the coast – which would imply a national stock of around half a million – and that there is the same density of long-term residents as in Lincolnshire, then around 70,000 households, comprising around 130,000 people, could be living for much or all of the year in seaside caravans. Of these, 25-30,000 households and around 50,000 people are, to all intents, likely to be full-time local residents.

Furthermore, these residents need to be *added* to the large numbers already known to be living in 'park homes' – static caravans with permission for all-year-round occupancy – estimated at 115,000 people across England and Wales (Berkeley Hanover Consulting, 2002). The evidence from Lincolnshire is that living in caravans has spread well beyond just park homes to include a much wider swathe of the stock.

In choosing to live in these caravans, residents are rarely if ever doing anything illegal. The evidence from Lincolnshire, for example, suggests that the requirements to vacate the site for a short period each year are strictly enforced. Whilst they are off-site these residents muddle through in a whole variety of ways, from staying with relatives to going on holiday abroad. But that does not alter the assessment that the caravan is their main home.

### **Are they ever counted?**

We have now established that there is a sizeable community of seaside caravan residents in Lincolnshire, where the survey was undertaken, and probably also around the coast as a whole. But are these men and women ever counted for official purposes or have they somehow become invisible, disappearing into the cracks between official categories or places? This question is best answered by reviewing a range of statistics, drawing once again on the evidence from Lincolnshire.

### ***Census of Population***

The Census aims to count the number of people resident in each part of the country, right down to the very local level. If individuals live in caravans, they should in theory to be included in the population figures.

In the output areas<sup>4</sup> that include the Lincolnshire coast's caravan sites, the 2001 Census<sup>5</sup> recorded just 551 people as living in 'a caravan or other mobile or temporary structure'. This compares with the estimate here, based on the survey, that perhaps 2,700 people in caravans should be regarded as Lincolnshire residents.

Inclusion in the Census depends on inclusion on an address list: a Census form can only be sent to a household if it has a known address. The problem is that most caravans do not have an individual address. Rather, there is a single address for the whole site. Census enumeration teams normally hold addresses for individual caravans only where the household is registered for Council Tax. Despite efforts to publicise the need to complete a Census form, and despite leaving forms with site owners, the view of the enumeration team in Lincolnshire is that their coverage of caravan residents has major shortcomings. The Census of Population therefore seems certain to seriously under-record caravan residents.

### ***Mid-Year Population Estimates***

Between the decennial Censuses, the mid-year population estimates provide up-dated figures. The mid-year population estimates are ultimately calibrated by the Census, so if the Census figures are wrong in the first place they will distort the subsequent mid-year estimates. The figures are revised on the basis of births and deaths, international migration data, and local migration data based on registrations with GPs. If in-movers to caravans register with GPs, their presence should be detected.

Year to year changes should therefore be reflected in the mid-year population estimates, especially if caravan residents register with local GPs, but the underlying numbers are still likely to be wrong because of shortcomings in the Census.

### ***Electoral Register***

To be included on the electoral register, the caravan has to be an individual's permanent address.

A sample of 16 Lincolnshire sites, with more than 5,100 static caravans between them, identifies 113 residents on the 2010 electoral register. Grossing up from this sample to the total of nearly 25,000 static caravans along the Lincolnshire coast suggests that the total number of caravan residents on the electoral register is likely to be around 550 – again, well below the population estimates derived from the survey.

If a caravan resident wants to be on the register they have to ask for an application form or, if they register for Council Tax, a form will normally be sent (though according to council officials in Lincolnshire this cannot always be relied on). Registration forms are not sent out to caravans other than through these two routes. It seems therefore that the electoral register is likely to miss substantial numbers of caravan residents.

### ***Council Tax***

Caravan residents are supposed to pay Council Tax if the caravan is their sole or main residence.

In 2010, local authority records show that just 270 caravan households on the Lincolnshire coast were registered for Council Tax. Bearing in mind the average occupancy rate (1.9 persons per household) this corresponds quite closely to the

estimated 550 caravan residents on the electoral register. Once more, however, this is far below the population estimate derived from the survey.

For some residents at least, avoiding Council Tax is an important benefit of caravan living. If residents do not volunteer themselves to be registered for Council Tax, councils have no simple procedures in place for locating them. In Lincolnshire, tip offs, DWP benefit claims and applications for bus passes are the way the district council finds out about residents on sites, at which point a letter requesting further information about their main residence is sent. If Council Tax is charged, a discount applies for the time the site is required to close in winter. The Council Tax register, like the electoral register, is therefore likely to miss substantial numbers of caravan residents.

### ***Housing waiting list***

Most local authorities have a 'main' housing waiting list – on the Lincolnshire coast the list is managed by New Linx Housing Trust on behalf of the district council – though some housing associations have their own waiting lists that are managed separately. In late 2010, records showed that 185 households in caravans or chalets on the Lincolnshire coast were on the main housing waiting list.

Anyone registering on the Lincolnshire housing waiting list has to give their current address but this can be a temporary postal address. The register is required to be 'open', meaning that anyone can join regardless of location or circumstances. A caravan address would not in itself be an obstacle. The waiting list is renewed annually on a rolling basis, which means that if applicants do not respond to a letter sent on the anniversary of joining the list they will be struck off. There is therefore no reason to suppose that the number of caravan residents on the housing waiting list will be seriously misleading.

### ***GP registrations***

Patients can be registered with a GPs' practice either permanently or temporarily. Not being registered locally is not a bar to using GPs' services, but all non-local patients have to fill out a registration form when they visit the doctor. There is no rule that dictates where an individual should be registered on a permanent basis, so if caravan residents prefer to remain registered elsewhere there is little that can be done about this. This is true even for those that require repeat prescriptions because arrangements are now in place for liaison with GPs elsewhere. There is therefore no reason why caravan residents should not be registered permanently with local GPs, but some may not do so.

### ***Welfare benefits***

Jobcentre Plus, which administers the benefits system, isn't really bothered whether claimants live in a caravan or not. What matters to them is that the claimant provides an address.

Jobseeker's Allowance claimants who live on caravan sites are most likely to have their claim registered locally because they are required to sign on fortnightly. Incapacity benefit claimants face no such requirement, and it is quite possible that longer-term caravan residents on incapacity benefits may keep their claim registered elsewhere. If the caravan is their sole or principal address, this is of course less likely. There is therefore likely to be some local under-recording of incapacity benefit claimants, but JSA figures are probably more reliable.

## **Implications for local authority funding**

The extent to which caravan residents are properly counted is not an abstract issue of interest only to statisticians. Crucially, official statistics drive a wide range of funding formulas so, in broad terms, the fewer people recorded as living in an area the less the funding allocated to support local public services. The evidence from the Lincolnshire coast, for example, is that there is a substantial population living in seaside caravans – 6,600 for substantial parts of the year, and 2,700 on an essentially full-time basis were our best estimates. Conversely, the Census of Population, the electoral register and Council Tax register all seriously under-record this population – they point to only around 500.

The omissions from the Census of Population are particularly important because Census data (and the mid-year population estimates built upon Census data) plays a central role in public sector funding formulas.

Caravan residents do use local services, though given their age profile it tends to be a particular set of services. The survey evidence for Lincolnshire shows that on a regular or occasional basis 51 per cent of caravan households use local GPs, 41 per cent use local hospitals, 23 per cent use local dentists and 17 per cent use local libraries. By comparison, hardly any use local schools, colleges or the local Job Centre.

All these proportions relate to the survey sample as a whole, including the caravan residents who spend long periods on site but still maintain another home elsewhere. The ‘full-time’ caravan residents, however, can be expected to draw on local services more extensively, if for no other reason than they have nowhere else to go. We estimated these full-time residents to account for 40 per cent of all the longer-term caravan residents on the Lincolnshire coast, which compares very closely with the 39 per cent of survey respondents registered with a GP at the caravan’s address. More generally, a higher population arising from caravan residents can be expected to add to demands on the local fire and emergency services, police, highways and refuse collection.

The point here is that because population goes unrecorded these additional demands on local services are unlikely to be funded. Moreover, even if the essentially middle-aged and older cohort that lives in seaside caravans does not draw heavily on some of the more expensive local services (schools for example) the under-recording of the seaside caravan population still creates a funding anomaly compared to places where the same group in living in brick-and-mortar housing is counted in the normal way.

There are two mechanisms through which local authorities will lose out financially. The first is through loss of Council Tax revenue, because only a minority of caravan residents are on the Council Tax register. The other is through loss of government grant, because population is one of the key variables feeding into the funding formula.

The second of these – government grant – is likely to be the bigger loss in most places, given that grants from central government account for around 70 per cent of all local authority revenue. Moreover, where there are two tiers of local government the loss of grant will impact most on the county council rather than the district – on Lincolnshire CC rather than East Lindsey DC in our survey area – because of the relative size of each authority’s budget and the scale of financial support from central government.

Putting hard numbers on these financial losses is not easy, and will anyway vary from place to place according to complexities in the local government funding formula. In Lincolnshire, the Census enumeration team quoted a loss of grant to the local

authorities of £4,000 a year per unrecorded household. This does not seem unreasonable. There might also be a loss of perhaps a further £1,000 a year for every household not included on the Council Tax register. If 1,000 full-time resident caravan households go unrecorded – a conservative estimate in the light of the survey data – the overall loss to the two Lincolnshire authorities is likely to be around £5m a year. Adding in all the other seaside local authorities with unrecorded caravan residents might bring the figure up to £100m a year.

Even this isn't quite the full story because, as the survey evidence shows, beyond the men and women who are essentially full-time caravan residents there is a further group who spend substantial time in their seaside caravan – on average between five and six months a year – but also maintain a home elsewhere. For Council Tax purposes, and in population figures, they will be recorded at their other home, and the public bodies there will receive the commensurate funding.

## Conclusions

Living in seaside caravans deserves further study, especially in a wider range of locations around the UK. Given the advances in technology, which have made static caravans a more habitable option on an all-year-round basis, and given the ageing of the UK population, it is hard not to see the numbers opting to live in caravans increasing in coming years. Housing market pressures – the affordability of bricks-and-mortar housing in large parts of Britain – probably also point in the same direction.

Local authorities, in particular, need to acknowledge the existence of this caravan community, and the fact that it now extends well beyond the confines of just 'park homes' where all-year round living has been permitted for some while. Most importantly, they need to begin to consider the implications of the under-recording of these residents for a range of funding formulas. At the moment, the under-recording of the caravan population means that they receive less in government grant and collect less in Council Tax revenue.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The research was commissioned by East Lindsey District Council using funding from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) under its Pathfinder initiative, intended to address the dangers of coastal flooding, to which most of Lincolnshire's caravans are exposed.

<sup>2</sup> The authors are grateful to the fieldwork team of BMG Research Ltd for carrying out the interviews.

<sup>3</sup> The figures are for East Lindsey DC, which covers the majority of the Lincolnshire coast including most of the caravan sites.

<sup>4</sup> Output Areas are the smallest geographical unit for which Census data is produced and generally comprise around 150 households.

<sup>5</sup> The 2011 Census was carried out whilst the survey was underway and its results are not available at the time of writing.

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