

## Briefing Paper 84

### Hearing the voice of Gypsies and Travellers: the history, development and challenges of Gypsy Traveller tenants and residents' associations

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#### Introduction

This TSRC Briefing Paper provides an overview of community development on Gypsy and Traveller sites during the past decade and details some good practice initiatives where attempts have been made to develop tenants and residents' associations (TRAs).

#### The historical development of Gypsy and Traveller tenants and residents associations

The 2004 Housing Act placed an obligation on Local Authorities to undertake a Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment (GTANA) (CLG, 2009a). These provide useful information on attempts by Local Authorities to involve Gypsy and Traveller tenants and residents in decision making processes concerning sites in the last decade. Many of the GTANA make an appeal for greater efforts to involve Gypsies and Travellers

but few go into detail. Of the 30, four GTANA surveyed only three make specific reference to tenants and residents groups. In most of the surveys, when expressing their aspirations, a majority of tenants were primarily concerned with the poor state or location of their sites and appeared to have little interest in establishing new forums. The London GTANA (2008) asked participants about the best way to keep Gypsies and Travellers informed about services. The survey revealed that a newsletter was the most popular suggestion. None of the respondents mentioned tenants and residents associations (TRAs) or other forums.

However, in 2003 the London Gypsy Traveller Unit established one of the first TRAs on a local authority site in Tower Hamlets. Since then other TRAs have been established and the work of two initiatives is featured below.

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## Friends Families and Travellers

Friends Families and Travellers (FFT) is a national charity. FFT offers services, advice, support and advocacy services. The case work of FFT plays an important role in informing its advocacy (Ryder and Greenfields/ITMB, 2010). This fusion of grassroots activity and support with the strategic work of FFT is evident in the development of TRAs. Sarah Mann, the Training and Capacity Building Manager at FFT states:

“Promoting resident's groups has often arisen out of dealing with a piece of casework on a site, or more likely, several pieces of casework with different residents on a site. E.g. poor repairs, concerns with allocations, complaints about site managers. After being seen to deal successfully with a problem on a site, we might suggest setting up a residents group”.

In promoting residents' groups FFT has received financial support over a two year period through a grant from the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Additional support has been received from Local Authorities who have supplied staff time, meeting rooms and refreshments. FFT believes that tenants' groups are important in that residents have greater leverage to negotiate improvements to sites and their management as a group rather than as individuals. FFT recognise the considerable obstacles to developing TRAs. Again, Sarah Mann notes:

“Many sites are in very poor condition and have big social problems and

people are so far away from being able to engage in an organised way that they need a lot of confidence building and some success to want or be able to become a formal group. Literacy is also a big issue as many adults on sites are not able to read. There is often a lot of mistrust of authority - poor historic management of sites is often a contributing factor”.

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## Stable Way Residents' Association

Stable Way (previously known as the Westway Travellers site) became a Local Authority site in 1976. Prior to this, it had been a traditional stopping place used by Gypsies and Irish Travellers for centuries. The site has 19 pitches (family spaces for caravans and mobile homes) and a small community centre located in a portacabin. 95 Irish Travellers reside on the site (Regan and Ahmed, 2011) which is under the Westway flyover, west London, and there is constant traffic overhead. Frequent complaints have been made by residents about noise and pollution. For eight years, Westway Development Trust, with increased resources from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC), has been funding work with families on Stable Way, employing a freelance community worker and Southwark Travellers Action Group to provide advocacy and support (Regan and Ahmed, 2011). This work has included the establishment of Stable Way Residents' Association. The Association has existed since October 2008 and has been supported by RBKC, Supporting People, the Irish

Traveller Movement in Britain, Westway Development Trust, Harrow Club and Advice Now. In 2010 the association constituted itself as a formal voluntary organisation. It aims to:

- improve the quality of life of Travellers living in the RBKC
- improve the voice and participation of Travellers in the policies and decisions affecting them
- enable access to debt and legal advice
- provide a place for children, young people and adults to come together to learn and have fun together
- work for and with, and to represent, Travellers living on Stable Way

(Regan and Ahmed, 2011)

The association is striving to increase the say residents have in the broad management of the site and support services, and is involved in projects such as computer literacy classes. However, decades of isolation and exclusion mean that the evolution of such residents' groups can be a slow process. A report on the progress of the group notes 'Whilst there is support for the Association by most residents, there is still the fear that this is another 'red herring' that does a lot of talking though without much meaningful action. For those officers actively involved with the Association this can be a barrier to full participation' (Regan and Ahmed, 2011). To develop such an association and overcome distrust can require high levels of resources and time (Kay, 2005). Unfortunately, few Local Authorities or agencies are willing or

able to commit the same level of resources as those involved in the pioneering work to develop Stable Way Residents' Association.

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Inclusive community development focuses on tenants' concerns and is an organic process of learning and upskilling. It is an approach that may avoid the mistakes of the past where Gypsy and Traveller tenants' groups and forums were developed on sites in the 1970s and 80s but failed, in part because an external agency dominated the agenda (Griffin, 2008), which sprang from paternalistic notions of community development. The TRAs identified in the above profiles represent the best traits of inclusive community development by helping communities build their own capacity to identify and solve problems (Toomey, 2009).

However, in some cases, progress can be slow or the enthusiasm of tenants can be tested by Local Authorities and other agencies being unresponsive to tenants' aspirations and requests.

On these sites TRAs are at a transitional stage. However, poor site management and in some cases a lack of facilities can create considerable challenges for emerging TRAs. Poor management of accommodation can leave a legacy of mistrust which can frustrate community development (Birchall, 1997). Despite the challenges, on the sites featured, tenants have mobilised to overcome their problems and there is a pool of tenants willing to support the tenants' groups. Some members of TRAs have become active

campaigners on a wider national stage, acting as trustees and committee members for major national voluntary organisations working in this field: a development which highlights the dynamic and transformative potential of Gypsy and Traveller TRAs and, more generally, of inclusive community development (Prins, 2005).

## Conclusion

The profiles demonstrate the challenges that hinder the development of TRAs on Traveller sites are not insurmountable but do require serious commitment from local and national actors and policy makers. One opportunity could be presented by the flagship policy area for the Coalition Government namely the 'Big Society' which seeks to promote new partnerships between community groups and wider service providers and decision making forums (Cabinet Office, 2012). In this process social enterprise is to be encouraged and community groups given the chance to run and deliver services (Emery/Guardian, 27/5/2011). However fears have been expressed that it will be the more established and relatively well resourced community groups that will be able to access this opportunity (Bartlett, 2009). In contrast Gypsy and

Travellers' community development groups are at a more fragile stage of development as is evidenced by the small number of Gypsy and Traveller TRAs. Gypsy and Traveller organisations may fail to access mainstream capacity development initiatives as they are not on the 'radar' and lack even the capacity to learn about development opportunities (NEP, 2008). If the Coalition Government wished to visibly prove its commitment to social action across a wide social divide it could do so by actively promoting the creation of TRAs on Traveller sites. Political rhetoric is behind, and sympathetic to, such an initiative but commitment and resources needs to accompany this development. It is to be hoped that Big Society Capital, the funding stream of the Big Society agenda, is attentive to the community development needs of the long term excluded who have been termed as 'below the radar' often lacking resources and developed community organisation (McCabe, Phillimore and Mayblin, 2010). Needs which warrant long term and intensive support may not always best be served by a procurement and commercial funding agenda, which appears to be a growing facet of the Big Society (Alcock, 2010).



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