

Third Sector Research Centre  
Discussion Paper D

## **THE REAL BIG SOCIETY**

### **Gypsy Traveller tenants and residents' associations and the role of social capital and empowerment in reversing exclusion**

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## Abstract

This discussion paper is linked to a TSRC Working Paper which gives an overview of the origins and development of tenants and residents' associations (TRAs) amongst Gypsies and Travellers (TSRC Working Paper 84). This TSRC discussion paper discusses the obstacles which may impede community development but outlines how these may be overcome and the valuable role TRAs could play in the empowerment, economic and social inclusion of this minority. This discussion paper aims to contribute to a wider debate between the tenants and residents of Traveller sites, those involved in their management and others active in the promotion of tenant empowerment in the wider housing sector.

### Key Words

Gypsy and Traveller; tenants and residents' associations; community development; social inclusion; empowerment.

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# Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Introduction</b> .....                                     | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Social exclusion</b> .....                                 | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Restrictions on nomadism</b> .....                         | <b>4</b>  |
| The Provision and Condition of Local Authority Sites .....    | 5         |
| <b>Tackling disempowerment</b> .....                          | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>Tackling poor access to services and exclusion</b> .....   | <b>10</b> |
| <b>Tackling unemployment</b> .....                            | <b>11</b> |
| <b>Tackling spatial exclusion</b> .....                       | <b>13</b> |
| <b>Tackling marginality in the accommodation agenda</b> ..... | <b>15</b> |
| <b>Conclusion</b> .....                                       | <b>16</b> |
| <b>References</b> .....                                       | <b>20</b> |

## Introduction

The Gypsy and community spokesperson Gloria Buckley MBE, reflecting on the Coalition Government flagship policy entitled the 'Big Society', commented:

'I don't know what 'Big Society' is. If, as has been suggested, it is local communities, neighbourhoods and families looking after each other, then Gypsies and Travellers have always been members of a Big Society; it has been the only one we could rely on' (Ryder, et al., 2011, 39).

This discussion paper presents a case for greater Government support for inclusive community development in the Gypsy and Traveller community through support for tenants and residents' associations. It acknowledges the value of social capital, as identified by Buckley (cited above), but believes it can be articulated through new forms of community development which are asset based and use existing community traditions and practices as a foundation for development.

It is believed that there may be no more than a dozen Gypsy and Traveller TRAs on official Traveller sites. This figure represents a fraction of the total number of such sites given that there are about 320 owned by Local Authorities in England alone<sup>1</sup> (Niner, 2002). It should however also be noted that there is a serious information gap on community development amongst Gypsies and Travellers and a need for mapping exercises (NEP, 2008) to provide reliable data.

The main focus of the paper is on Gypsies and Irish Travellers as these groups are the predominant residential groups on Local Authority sites in the UK although the potential of associations on private sites and in rented sector/social housing is also explored (For a more detailed discussion of the definition of this group see TSRC Working Paper 84).

## Social exclusion

The UK is estimated to have a Gypsy and Traveller population of approximately 180,000-300,000 (CRE, 2006). One third of this minority continue to practice nomadic lifestyles - or at least a semblance of nomadism through the occupation of caravans (Clark and Greenfields, 2006). Approximately thirty per cent of this caravan dwelling group reside on Local Authority Traveller sites (CLG, 2009a). Within England and Wales there is a national network of approximately 320 such sites. Bi-annual count data collected in recent years shows that, of Gypsies and Travellers living in caravans, approximately a fifth live on unauthorised sites (Johnson and Willers, 2007). This high rate of homelessness is a major factor contributing to the exclusion of the group.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This figure for Gypsy and Traveller TRAs is based on an estimate by one community development worker, working specifically on developing a TRA in the Traveller community for the past two years and the author's knowledge of this sector. The figure is an approximate one and a larger number of more informal and site focused forums probably exist, but lack a constituted structure

<sup>2</sup> An unauthorised encampment is where Gypsies and Travellers live on public or private land which they do not own and without planning permission. An unauthorised development is where Gypsies and Travellers own land which they live on but do not have planning permission but in general they are seeking to obtain it. Both are unauthorised and thus residents on such sites are technically homeless. (Richardson, 2007 and Johnson & Willers, 2007).

Gypsies and Travellers are amongst the most excluded groups in British society as reflected in lower life expectancy (CRE, 2006; Cemlyn et. al, 2009) and poor rates of educational achievement (DCSF, 2009). There are also reports of growing unemployment and welfare dependency amongst members of these communities (CRE, 2004; Cemlyn et. al., 2009). A survey by MORI, commissioned by Stonewall, found Gypsies and Travellers to be the most reviled groups in society, alongside asylum seekers (Stonewall, 2003).

Exclusion has often been accentuated for Gypsies and Travellers by their lack of literacy or understanding and trust of political processes which, in addition to a lack of formal organisation, has contributed to disempowerment (Ryder, 2011). This lack of political power is evidenced by the small number of TRAs that exist. As noted, the majority of TRAs that have been established are on Local Authority sites. The factors behind the development of these sites, as well as their location and conditions, have created a complex web of exclusion which, in itself, has impeded community development.

## Restrictions on nomadism

In 1960 the Government brought in new legal restrictions on camping on common land. Those restrictions coupled with the development of traditional stopping places resulted in an increase in the number of unauthorised encampments and a consequential rise in tensions between Gypsies and Travellers and the settled community (Richardson and Ryder, 2009). These tensions prompted the Government to act in 1968 and set up an established network of sites.

The Caravan Sites Act (1968) imposed a statutory duty on Local Authorities to provide sites and rewarded those that complied with the duty by giving them extra enforcement powers against unauthorised encampments in a process known as 'designation' (Hawes and Perez, 1996).

Increased restrictions on nomadism and 'new' sources of work which were increasingly outside of agriculture, were focused on trades like construction and vehicle repair (Greenfields et al., 2012). These new trades warranted less frequent travel and this, combined with a desire to have better access to services, in particular health and education, meant that on the part of Gypsies and Travellers there was a move by some to more sedentary lifestyles (Acton, 1974).

However, it has been claimed that the creation of a national network of sites stemmed from a desire to exert control and discourage traditional nomadic patterns as opposed to any humanitarian intentions to reduce the hardship of eviction and homelessness (Okely, 1983, 2001). A lack of regard for the well-being of residents of Local Authority sites revealed itself in their location, limited rights in terms of tenancy and the condition of sites. The quote below by one Gypsy in evidence to a Select Committee summarises the negative perceptions held by some tenants :

Local Authority sites are often provided, designed and managed with the control and containment of the residents as the aim—there appears to be no commitment to providing safe and healthy places for families to live or to ensuring the appropriate provision of services to families who live on the sites (ODPM Select Committee, 2004)

This discussion paper argues that TRAs could play an important role in helping to combat the exclusion Gypsies and Travellers experience. To appreciate the roles of such groups it is important to understand the nature of exclusion facing Gypsies and Travellers. The development of TRAs in the

mainstream housing sector has been powered by the concerns and anxieties of tenants and has played a fundamental role in shaping the focus and development of TRAs (Cooper and Hawtin, 1997). A general overview has already been provided of exclusion, below is a more detailed account of problems being experienced on Local Authority sites which will be key motivating factors and areas of concern in the establishment of Gypsy and Traveller TRAs.

### **The Provision and Condition of Local Authority Sites**

The Labour Government commissioned Pat Niner of Birmingham University to undertake a review of the network of Local Authority and socially rented sites (Niner, 2002; 2003). Niner found most sites were located in fringe areas of towns or villages (70%), and a further fifth (19%) were in rural areas. A mere 3% of sites were located in suburban residential areas and 8% in fully urban areas. Niner concluded that in view of these locations, it is no surprise that most sites have limited or poor access to basic services: 68% of sites were more than 1 kilometre from a primary school and 55% were more than 1km from a post office (Niner, 2003, 68). Niner also discovered that approximately half of all sites suffer from problems from adjoining land such as motorways or major roads (26% of sites), followed by railways (13%); rubbish tips (12%); industrial or commercial activity (8%) and sewage works (3%) (Niner, 2003, 76). The poor location is often a product of the historic local opposition that emerged to site proposals when attempts were made to develop these were near residential areas. Councillors and Local Government decision makers tended to shy away from such confrontation and exerted pressure for sites to be located in remote and marginal spaces (Richardson, 2007). The poor location and screening of these sites often adds to a sense of isolation as reflected in the comments of one site resident “They put the sites on the railways lines or they put a big bank all the way round or put it somewhere where nobody can see us. I mean we are people we deserve to be seen” (Ryder and Greenfields/ITMB, 2010).

Aside from the poor location of the sites, the infrastructure of the sites deteriorated as government financial support was halted with the abolition of the duty to provide sites in 1994 (Cemlyn et al., 2009). Funding to refurbish was restored in 2003 but not all Local Authorities accessed this funding and there has been a considerable under-spend of allotted money (Topping, 2011a). The author of this paper is aware that, in some cases, tenants have been inadequately consulted about refurbishment and the workmanship of repairs has been substandard. Thus, a significant number of Gypsies and Travellers who reside on Local Authority sites find themselves living in inappropriate locations, in poor quality and badly maintained accommodation with, for example, significant failings in fire safety, contamination by vermin, chronically decayed sewage and water fittings, as well as poor-quality utility rooms (Cemlyn et al., 2009; Niner, 2003). It has been claimed that some private sites with rented pitches are worse in physical terms than Local Authority sites and could, be liable to prosecution on the grounds of health and safety. However, few, if any, prosecutions appear to take place (Cemlyn, et al., 2009). Negative perceptions of Local Authority sites are evident in the following quotes from Gypsies and Travellers collected through Gypsy Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment (GTANA).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The 2004 Housing Act placed an obligation on Local Authorities to undertake a Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment (GTANA). These assessments were carried out at a subregional level between 2006 and 2008 and were based on individual council assessments or clusters of district councils or were conducted at county/metropolitan level (CLG, 2009a).

'My opinion of xxxx site, and I've lived there for ten year, I think it should be closed down, cos all it is is a tip and there's rats running up and down and all sorts' (Gypsy, female, 28 Yorkshire and Humber GTANA, 2006, 54).

'Well they're in grot areas aren't they? They're next to a sewage works or they're next to a council tip... I stopped on one next to a cement works so all dust and everything blew over' (Gypsy, female, 23 Yorkshire and Humber GTANA, 2006, 54).

This particular GTANA noted that in the extreme, comparisons were drawn between Local Authority sites and 'compounds' or 'open-air prisons' due to the isolated location and concrete aesthetics (Yorkshire and Humber GTANA, 2006, 55). Perceptions of a loss of agency and disempowerment have also come about as a consequence of authoritarian management regimes. In some cases overworked and under-resourced site managers operating on sites with multiple difficulties (which can include anti-social behaviour and divisions amongst tenants) may fail to effectively consult tenants. Tensions which impact negatively on consultation may stem from legitimate enforcement action initiated by a site manager and Local Authority. However, the perceptions of some tenants is that site managers are authoritarian where formal consultation including TRAs has been rejected in favor of informal one to one consultation. The following quote reveals the nature of some of these frustrations in an extreme form:

'What a lot of people don't know is that (site manager) terrorises people, even some of the young children go screaming to their mothers when (site manager) comes up the road here, anyone like (resident) who's a little weak hearted and nervous it doesn't help, when someone like (site manager) says if you don't clear up your pitch in seven days you'll get evicted. That's no way to treat people! When you go around these council estates you can see old cars on the forecourts, caravans and stuff but they don't bother about them!' (unpublished field notes collected by Ryder)

Economic exclusion also appears to be a problem on sites with evidence suggesting that the Traveller economy is in some locations in a state of crisis. Niner noted that, in over a third of Local Authority sites in England, managers reported that below ten percent of tenants were employed. Given that the network of approximately 320 Local Authority sites accommodates one third of the caravan dwelling Gypsy and Traveller community, economic exclusion rates (at least amongst socially accommodated families) was already exceptionally high at the time that study was undertaken (Niner, 2003). It has been asserted that this is a product of the poor location of these sites and poor access to services (Ryder and Greenfields/ITMB, 2010). Furthermore, it has been claimed that onsite restrictions against work activities (coupled with the movement of more economically successful families to private sites) has destabilized the Traveller economy on Local Authority sites (Ryder and Greenfields/ITMB, 2010).

There is evidence that economic exclusion is compounded by the site address itself. A number of GTANA report site tenants were unable to secure vehicle insurance or paid much higher premiums (East Surrey GTANA, 2007 19). Further evidence is offered of direct employment discrimination with a quarter of the London GTANA survey who were tenants on sites felt that they had been denied work due to being a Gypsy or Traveller when participants gave their address to prospective employers (London GTANA, 2008, 80 – 9.24).

Local Authority sites have therefore suffered through a combination of economically successful families leaving these sites, on-site work restrictions and the decline of sections of the Traveller economy due to a failure to acquire new skills and an inability through a lack of education to adapt and conform to business practices (Ryder and Greenfields/ITMB, 2010). Economic decline coupled with spatial marginalization and poor access to services has created profound pockets of exclusion on some Local Authority sites.

A symptom of chronic social and spatial exclusion may be manifestations of deviancy. In a discussion of Gypsy and Traveller deviancy, care should be taken as stereotyping of Gypsies Roma and Travellers as being habitually engaged in criminal activity is common in political and media discourse. Such stereotypes have become ingrained in the public's perceptions of this group (Ryder et al., 2011). However, it has been noted in the Equality and Human Rights Commission literature review that the Association of Chief Police Officers state they have no disproportionate problems with criminality in the Travelling population (Cemlyn et al., 2009). Gypsy and Traveller criminality, as with that in the wider community, is more evident in locations which experience acute and multiple exclusion. Hence, some Traveller sites might be more susceptible to some forms of deviancy as a consequence of chronic exclusion. Commenting on the exclusion that can be caused by the location and nature of certain sites, the National Association of Gypsy Traveller Officers (NAGTO), an association of Local Authority site managers and liaison officers, states:

...dependency, and many of the separate and unsuitable locations of the sites provided, their construction and management arrangements, created a kind of ghetto effect. Their populations lived very separately from the rest of the local population. The policing of them was carried out sometimes on a very primitive and confrontational basis. While those who lived on public sites (or on the side of the road) were often excluded (or they kept away, or both) from education, easy access to health services, training and therefore employment opportunities, the level of criminality (though still denied by some in the communities) was almost certainly higher than for populations around them and that exclusion and criminality fed into and increased the prejudice and racism of others. (Ryder et al., 2011, 72)

A cycle of exclusion, depression, mental ill health and addiction has become a feature of life for some Gypsies and Travellers on sites experiencing multiple exclusion (Appleton et al., 2003; Power, 2004; Cambridgeshire GTANA, 2006, Meek, 2007). One successful Gypsy entrepreneur who lives on a private site informed the author that residents on Local Authority sites

'... are not part of the settled community and they're not Gypsies either, being stuck on a council site, with all that concrete around them twenty four hours a day. They're trapped in an enclosure like a dog's kennel, fencing steel wire, concrete posts, one toilet and shower per family, mother and father having no space for themselves.....if you live on a council site like that your hope has gone and you have no hope for your children, your family is going to rot. Wouldn't that depress you? People get in a trap and it's difficult to get out' (Unpublished field notes collected by Ryder).

These words provide an insight into the views some Gypsy and Travellers hold, in particular those who are more economically successful. This may reflect similar tensions and hierarchies between home owners and tenants in the wider community. The judgement expressed above about such tenants no longer being Gypsies, may also reflect the negative impact such hierarchies and



perceptions can have upon identity and self-esteem. The quote also conveys the loss of agency and autonomy that some Gypsies and Travellers can feel accompanies tenancy on a site.

Problems such as these above have persisted because of the marginality of Traveller accommodation issues, with successive Governments being slow, or failing, to act and as a result of the issue not being sufficiently mainstreamed in wider debates and initiatives to improve the conditions of social housing and tenants' rights. This paper has gone into considerable detail in outlining the problems which residents of Local Authority Traveller sites endure which can be summarised as follows:

- disempowerment
- poor access to services and exclusion
- high unemployment
- spatial Exclusion
- marginality in the accommodation agenda

The following section examines the potential for TRAs to address these issues on Local Authority sites, private sites and those resident in housing.

## Tackling disempowerment

Starting with disempowerment, TRAs can be forums through which tenants can articulate their aspirations to site managers but also a means by which managers can consult. Guidance by Communities and Local Government states that an ingredient to good site management and relationships is taking on board the views of residents (CLG, 2009b). Such an approach could include the establishment of a TRA. CLG guidance states:

It is essential that the views of Gypsy and Traveller residents are taken into account about the services provided.... Appropriate consultation with site residents helps develop a sense of partnership and trust between the site manager and the residents, ...which may include a residents' association or committee to represent the views of site residents (CLG, 2009b, 14.1-2).

Traveller TRAs could facilitate even wider engagement in decision making by providing a first step for members of the community to learn the processes involved in more formalised decision making including how meetings are organised, how terms of reference govern a group, inputting into decision making and fundraising. Attempts to mobilise and campaign by some Gypsies and Travellers have been limited or impeded because of an absence of such skills This has led to some Gypsy and Traveller groups having the title and/or veneer of a formal group when in reality they are small groupings based on family networks or charismatic leadership (Ryder, 2011). In other cases the author has seen Gypsies and Travellers enter more formal meetings but they have been confused by the formality of the processes at play or lacked the confidence to participate, in what can be equated to Freire's 'culture of silence' (1970). For Freire powerlessness could perpetuate disempowerment and accentuate fatalism and a lack of confidence. As a result some Gypsies and Travellers have distanced themselves from initiatives which have sought to mobilise: a reluctance compounded by an

element of mistrust and/or fear of decision makers (CLG, Task Group, 2007). The Traveller Economic Inclusion Project noted how Gypsy and Traveller support workers had developed confidence to become effective advocates by gaining experience in a range of forums, finally entering and inputting into highly formalised meetings such as Parliamentary events and planning hearings (Ryder and Greenfields/ITMB, 2010). As noted in a series of case studies TRAs can provide an invaluable training ground for more community advocates (TSRC Working Paper 84).

The GTANAs indicate that many Local Authorities place an emphasis on communication with tenants through Traveller Liaison Officers who are Local Authority staff engaged in liaison and delivering support to Gypsies and Travellers. There are examples where Traveller liaison officers have greatly improved Gypsies and Travellers' access to services, and facilitated the delivery of joined up services. However, in some cases these liaison officers have an enforcement role which can create misconceptions about such posts. This can impede community trust towards post holders especially when they are issuing formal warnings or initiating the eviction of tenants from sites. A number of GTANA strongly recommend the separation of enforcement and liaison duties (Lancashire, GTANA 2007, 130).

Where there is a separation of enforcement and liaison in these posts, TRAs could greatly supplement the work of liaison officers or replace them and improve Local Authority outreach to Gypsy and Traveller communities. Such a partnership approach avoids an over dependence on one individual from both sides of the service divide - clients and providers. However, as one GTANA notes such engagement can present a considerable challenge

Key to monitoring and ensuring appropriate provision is made is undertaking meaningful consultation over sustained periods with the community. In the past the community has in general been sceptical of dealings with Local Authorities, with many experiences being negative. Including being moved on and failure to obtain planning permission etc. This negative relationship must be reversed and the introduction of Gypsy Liaison Officers in many authorities within the region is already having positive impacts (North East GTANA 2007, 45 - 7.4).

Again though the notion of a TRA does not appear to enter the equation as a possible strategy to surmount this problem. By promoting TRAs Local Authorities could find they have a 'critical friend', a partner that can assist in the management of sites.

As well as Local Authorities needing to address issues of disempowerment, Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) and Housing Associations also need to promote Gypsy and Traveller tenant involvement. Many ALMOs have made strong claims in relation to local accountability and resident empowerment (Mullins, 2010). Hackney Homes is one ALMO that has sought to transfer this tradition to Gypsies and Travellers and has striven to develop a tailored and inclusive service for Gypsy and Traveller tenants in the borough of Hackney. It is one of the first ALMOs to adopt a strategic approach to this community (UKHA, 2010). A central element of Hackney Homes' work has been a floating support service. This has been crucial in involving tenants in the redesign and relocation of existing sites leading to the development of what some consider to be amongst the best Traveller accommodation in the country (UKHA, 2010). It is to be hoped that ALMOs with Gypsy and Traveller tenants will adopt a 'Community Gateway' approach to the transfer of housing stock to

ALMOs giving tenants a choice of involvement – ranging from straightforward consultation through to direct management - and even ownership - of their housing (Confederation of Co-operative Housing, Chartered Institute of Housing and Co-operative Union, 2003).

## Tackling poor access to services and exclusion

Traveller TRAs can also play an important role in improving access to services. They can act as a contact point with external service providers, for example health and education. They can represent the needs of tenants and make them aware of support and services. In this process they can help to forge relationships and trust on both sides and possibly reverse, or at least address, the acute exclusion which is evident on some sites. The involvement of tenants groups with a range of services can facilitate the type of inter-agency work which is advocated in the 'Every Child Matters' agenda (DFES, 2004). Such a preventative approach continues to fit with Government policy agendas in health, education and services for children and young people (Allen; 2011). CLG guidance on managing sites notes the value of such strategies through tenant involvement (CLG, 2009b).

One important example of where TRAs could play a mediatory role would be in working with young people. In the past service providers have stated that they have felt uncomfortable entering sites where they are unknown (Niner, 2003) and where there may be problems with groups not in employment education or training (NEETS) or involved in anti-social behaviour. Such apprehension may be caused by the unfamiliarity of the environment a service provider is entering, or previous bad experiences of dealing with officials can sour relations between a site and outsiders. Furthermore, teenagers who have had negative experiences with schools and other agencies may be difficult to 'engage'. In reaching out to such groups and providing effective support a long term process is needed to develop trust and meaningful relationships. This takes time and for tangible results to be delivered but tenants' groups can act as a bridge and mediation point between the site and wider service providers.

In some cases well organised TRAs would be able to mobilise effective campaigns to encourage their Local Authorities to be more proactive in promoting a social inclusion agenda for Gypsies and Travellers. They could monitor the work of Local Authority Departments and officers and challenge situations where sites suffer from poor conditions or problems in access to services and facilities. TRAs could also play a role in equality impact assessment monitoring where it is initiated. As with TRAs in the wider housing sector they could play the role of 'critical friends' to Local Authorities, prodding and nudging them through constructive dialogue to make change (Centre for Public Scrutiny, 2012). TRAs though can also reflect the more oppositional traits of inclusive community development by bringing about change through collective strength and solidarity (Alinsky, 1972).

Another important role for tenants' groups could be in helping explain to tenants what their rights are under new security of tenure provisions.<sup>4</sup> In the past GTANAs have indicated high levels of

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<sup>4</sup> Following a legal case at the European Court of Human Rights the Government sought to address security of tenure in the Housing and Regeneration Act (H&RA) which was passed in 2008. H&RA 2008 Section 318 amends MHA 1983 Section 5 so as to extend the security of tenure provisions in the Mobile Homes Act 1983 to

confusion amongst tenants as to what their rights are on Local Authority sites. The Cambridgeshire GTANA (2006) noted 40% of Local Authority respondents did not understand the difference between tenancies and licences. Of those who said they did, apparently few got it right, being of the opinion that a licence referred to having your own site and being thus 'able to do what you want'. "This response seems to reflect an ignorance of legal and official matters, linked to low literacy levels and general exclusion" (Cambridgeshire GTANA, 2006, 23, see also North Surrey, 2007, 21, Dorset, 2006 3.3.5, London, 2008, 55 – 6.26, Suffolk, 2007, 36- 4.2.4). Thus, a great challenge lies ahead to ensure that tenants understand new rights and it could be the case that tenants groups could play an effective role in negotiating and brokerage.

Amongst the more challenging roles in helping tenants understand their new rights and the legal framework that governs tenancy is giving support to residents in grievance disputes. As part of the changes in security of tenure all disputes (with the exception of possession actions) arising from the Mobile Homes Act 1983 will go to Residential Property Tribunals.<sup>5</sup> With pending changes to eligibility for Legal Aid, tenants will not be able to access legal aid for legal representation in such hearings although Local Authorities will be able to make use of their in-house legal teams. There is thus the danger that such hearings could become rather one sided, in this case well organised and resourced TRAs could play a key role in giving practical support to tenants engaged in a grievance hearing.

## Tackling unemployment

In the wider housing sector TRAs have acted as the springboard for locally inspired social enterprise. In recent times the financial crisis and recession have emphasised the value of harnessing these locally based sectors to forge alternative employment pathways and the regeneration of deprived neighbourhoods (Jones, 2010). The Traveller Economic Inclusion Project envisaged that such a role could be extended to Traveller sites through community groups utilising targeted projects and social enterprise (Ryder and Greenfields/ITMB, 2010). This section of the paper provides insights into possible strategies.

On some Local Authority sites which are experiencing exclusion, service providers have established innovative on-site training programmes where tenants have been helped with the literacy section of driving theory classes or where youth projects have been carried out with a view to forging relationships and positive experiences of training schemes with the possibility of eventually integrating participants into more mainstream programmes (Ryder and Greenfields/ITMB, 2010). Vanderbeck (2009) outlines the tensions that can be created for state, voluntary and community groups that can

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cover Gypsies and Travellers residing on local authority sites. The implementation was delayed as the government decided that H&RA 2008 Section 318 should not be brought into force until an extensive consultation process on supplementary matters (such as assignment and succession) had been concluded (Johnson, et al., 2010). The measures came into force in 2011. Under the Mobile Homes Act Local Authorities are legally obliged to consult with qualifying residents' associations, which are defined as having at least 50 percent of the occupiers on that site as members of the association. For a fuller discussion see TSRC Working Paper 84.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted, these are a potential target in the public sector cuts.

veer between being centred on normative and assimilationist agendas and 'user led' action where trust and consent is integral in interactions with Gypsy and Traveller clients. Vanderbeck argues that voluntary/community groups can have a greater potential than statutory agencies in the latter objectives as statutory agencies have often been at the fore of control and assimilationist measures and can be the object of acute mistrust by Gypsies and Travellers. Such approaches have historically encompassed acts designed to encourage Gypsies and Travellers to abandon traditional and economic nomadic lifestyles, considered to be dysfunctional by agencies, and instead adopt settled and waged lifestyles (Ryder and Greenfields/ITMB, 2010). TRAs could overcome some of these tensions and play an important role in ensuring support and participation in projects and services that could tackle economic exclusion, acting as a service provider or intermediary or partner with other services to offer tailored and culturally appropriate services that reflect the aspirations of this community.

The Traveller Economic Inclusion Project, a research project funded by Big Lottery to investigate Gypsy and Traveller economic exclusion (Ryder and Greenfields/ITMB, 2010) casts some doubts as to how effective individualised and waged labour directed employment initiatives are when aimed at unemployed Gypsies and Travellers who have often experienced educational exclusion and may have poor literacy skills. The research proposed that given preferences for family-oriented employment activities (often centred on bonding social capital) long term unemployed Gypsies and Travellers may benefit from more collective and community orientated initiatives that use as a foundation the pre-existing social and cultural capital of the community. Elsewhere it has been noted that social and community enterprise can revitalise communities in decline as a consequence of their reliance on a strong network of social relations (Johnstone and Lionais, 2004). This approach may be effective in localised spaces of economic exclusion where Gypsies and Travellers living on Local Authority sites are experiencing high levels of unemployment and the Traveller economy is in a state of crisis. The bonding social capital of some of these communities could be a foundation for regeneration and social enterprise (Ryder and Greenfields/ITMB, 2010).

Thus, instead of trying to integrate unemployed Gypsies and Travellers into waged employment opportunities which are likely to be low paid and low skilled in alien and isolated work environments, the Traveller economy could be revitalised through utilising the skills and assets contained within the close networks which exist on sites. Such assets include reciprocity, mutuality and the cohesive properties of social capital, which it has been argued are central to any strategies for neighbourhood renewal (CONSCISE, 2003; Forrest and Kearns, 2001). Economic revival initiatives, centred on popular and viable trades within the Traveller economy such as construction, landscaping and vehicle repair, could take place on Traveller sites experiencing economic and spatial exclusion. Here statutory service providers could work in partnership with TRAs. The development of work opportunities as well as training could be delivered through 'social firms' and co-operatives and other forms of social enterprise. By investing an element of autonomy and community control, which can be a feature of social enterprise, work and training opportunities can be shaped to be culturally appropriate and replicate traits within the Traveller economy (Ryder and Greenfields/ITMB, 2010).

## Tackling spatial exclusion

As noted, a key facet of spatial exclusion for Gypsies and Travellers is the condition, location and shortage of sites. TRAs could play an active role in the actual delivery and development of new sites or the management of new and existing sites. A tenants' association could transform themselves into a Community Land Trust (CLT) or other social enterprise entities that could compete for assets designated by central or local government for accommodation. CLTs are increasingly recognised as one possible means of overcoming the widespread problems of social exclusion and unaffordable housing. As well as ensuring long-term affordability, CLTs also encourage active citizenship by giving local people collective control of decisions in relation to land and assets.<sup>6</sup> There has been some support for using CLTs to develop new sites and the Local Authority in Mendip has been actively exploring this option (Mendip, 2010). However, the Panel Review of Coalition Government policy revealed interest by bodies such as the Gypsy Council in actually using CLTs to take over the management of Local Authority sites in a similar way to which social housing has been transferred to housing associations (Ryder et al., 2011). In fact some housing associations have been successful in not only empowering residents but also in reversing exclusion (Forster, 2009). There is no reason why such successes could not be replicated across Local Authority sites. In the past there was some debate about whether Gypsies and Travellers should, like those in council housing, have the right to buy Local Authority pitches. However, a number of actors both governmental and in the Gypsy and Traveller lobby have been hesitant to support such an initiative as it was felt that this would deplete a precious stock of social accommodation for which there is a high demand. However, the involvement of housing associations, CLTs, Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs), Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs) and Housing Associations could provide tenants with a feeling of greater control over their homes without sacrificing the core values of social housing.

In the past some have expressed apprehension about Gypsy and Traveller tenants being more directly involved in site management. Niner (2003) noted mixed views about Traveller and non-Traveller site management. There was a fear by some Traveller respondents that if Travellers themselves were involved more in management processes that there might be a danger of kin or ethnic bonds impeding objective management whereas outsiders would be more detached and hence fairer. However, according to Niner some participants thought that Travellers could be more effective as they understood the groups' culture and traditions. Much of this discussion by Niner on tenant management centred on the prospect of Gypsy and Traveller site managers rather than collective forms of involvement. Niner did find one of the best-liked sites in the research was managed for the Local Authority by Travellers (Niner, 2003).

Another dimension to the work of TRAs could see them exerting pressure on their Local Authorities to develop new sites to address overcrowding in existing accommodation. The Localism Act 2011 will give Local Authorities more leeway as to where and whether sites will be built in the future. Removing the obligation to identify land for sites, which the Labour Government established, it

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<sup>6</sup> [www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk](http://www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk)



is feared possible future development may come to a standstill (Ryder et al., 2011). Hence, the voice of Gypsies and Travellers, as articulated through TRAs, could be one factor that keeps some focus on the need for more sites in the new micro political arena of Coalition Government localism.

TRAs could also ensure that pressure is exerted on Local Authorities to access government refurbishment grants for Local Authority sites. It has been reported that only 16.9 million pounds was used for refurbishment out of a figure of 97 million pounds made available in 2008. This underspend indicates a lack of will by some Local Authorities to access these funds despite the poor conditions on some sites and deep concerns of tenants about the facilities and even location of the sites (Topping, 2011a). Pressure from TRAs could ensure that the new funding scheme of 60 million pounds from 2011 to 2015 will be fully used to refurbish sites, build new ones and even relocate those located in unsuitable spaces

There is no reason why TRAs should be confined to Local Authority sites. On private sites associations could provide an effective inter-face between the site and external agents. At the unauthorised development at Dale Farm, Irish Travellers attempted to develop a site on land they owned but which did not have planning permission. The Local Authority sought to evict Travellers from this unauthorised encampment and Travellers sought to find a compromise and agreed to relocate if the Local Authority in Basildon could help them identify appropriate land (Topping, 2011b). To this end residents formed the Dale Farm Housing Association which was established with 100 members. Although the association failed to receive the funding or support needed to provide alternative sites to avoid a forced eviction, it served as an important forum akin to a TRA ensuring that residents' views could be articulated in the campaign to prevent a forced eviction.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1994) repealed the duty on Local Authorities to provide sites, a planning circular (Circular 1/94) was introduced which did seek to encourage them to help Gypsies and Travellers to buy their own land and develop private sites (Clark and Greenfields, 2006). The weakness of the circular meant many Local Authorities ignored it thus leading to a rise in unauthorised developments as Travellers bought their own land moved onto it without planning permission (Ryder et al., 2011). Under the Labour Government, a new obligation was introduced for Local Authorities to identify land for sites (CLG Task Group, 2007). The Coalition Government's abolition of this framework through the Localism Bill may mean that this process of authorising unauthorised sites will come to an end and that some temporary permissions will not be renewed (Ryder et al., 2011). Whatever the outcome it is clear that unauthorised developments can attract huge public opposition and lead to long and protracted legal cases (Richardson, 2007). In this sense TRAs on private sites could be effective forums through which complex legal information can be channelled and present a means by which residents can mobilise legal actions and lobby in defence of the continuance of their sites.

It should also be noted that large numbers of Gypsies and Travellers also live in social housing; often becoming highly concentrated on some estates (Cemlyn et al., 2009). Housed Gypsies and Travellers may experience the same problems as their counterparts on failing Local Authority sites

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<sup>7</sup> The Advocacy Project – accessed 2012 <http://www.advocacynet.org/>

with poor access to services, low levels of literacy and training and long term unemployment. Added to this is the problem of isolation: being cut off from bonding social networks and experiencing racism and hostility from non-Traveller residents, leading to depression and cultural dislocation (Shelter, 2007). The Shelter report on good practice service support for Gypsies and Travellers specifically recommends that Local Authorities and housing associations encourage housed residents to join residents groups, and ensuring that there is information available that is accessible to the community (Shelter, 2007). In order to assist Gypsies and Travellers to participate in wider TRAs sub-associations could be formed which Gypsy and Traveller tenants can use to develop ideas and strategies to improve support services and housing conditions. Another option is for housed Gypsies and Travellers to be members of a site tenants association. This would make sense in some situations as they are in some cases related to residents on a nearby site and had to move into housing because of the long waiting lists on most Local Authority sites, a process that has been accentuated by the virtual standstill of new Local Authority site provision since 1994.

In recent years the Roma population in the UK has grown through increased migration from Central and Eastern Europe. Evidence suggests that many live in overcrowded accommodation with multiple family occupation in units designed for one family (Fordhams 2008, 73). A study in Govanhill estimated a Roma community of 2-3000 concentrated in 4-5 streets. Roma are often dependent on the private sector, experiencing high rents, substandard conditions, no tenancy agreements and gross overcrowding (European Dialogue 2009, Poole and Adamson 2008). Other migrant groups before them like Black migrants who arrived in the UK in the 1950s responded to prejudice and racism as well as high rents and substandard living conditions by forming tenants' groups (Grayson, 1997), which could provide a model for Roma community development.<sup>8</sup> Likewise initial multiple occupation patterns in the private rented sector by some ethnic groups has progressed to owner occupation as a result of community based saving schemes.

## Tackling marginality in the accommodation agenda

Those involved in the development of Traveller TRAs are now beginning to work at a more strategic level promoting TRAs and disseminating good practice. A number of participants in the Stable Way Residents Association are hoping to work with groups like Friends, Families and Travellers and others to establish some form of national forum in which good practice can be shared to assist in the development of more Traveller TRAs. In this process community development work on TRAs is moving to a process of 'alliance building and advocacy' by forming networks and expressing solidarity and support between communities and projects (Toomey, 2009). To assist the process of wider community development the community group Friends Families and Travellers have developed a toolkit *'How to Set up and Run Residents Group'* to assist tenants and support agencies in this

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<sup>8</sup> A2 workers (Bulgarian and Romanian) Roma face employment restrictions. Unless self employed A2 workers can work under the Sectors Based Scheme (SBS), allowing employers to recruit low skilled A2 workers in industries like food manufacturing (European Dialogue 2009, 23). There is a cap on the number of A2 workers that can be employed through SBS. These restrictions have forced some into the grey/informal economy (European Dialogue 2009). These Roma endure particularly poor living conditions but their precarious employment status makes any potential challenge limited.



endeavour. The toolkit contains a great deal of practical support and advice and includes templates for a range of documents and policies.<sup>9</sup>

Such strategic engagement may emulate work initiated in the wider housing sector by TRAs where umbrella groups like the Tenant Participation Advisory Service, Tenants' and Residents' Organisations of England, Confederation of Co-operative Housing, and the National Federation of Tenant Management Organisations have been formed. Gypsies and Travellers have already developed lobbying and strategic organisations such as the Traveller Law Reform Project and an All Party Parliamentary Group for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (APPG GRT). In the past these groups have worked alongside wider housing interests. For example, some discussion took place between the APPG GRT and All Party Group for Mobile Homes about the need for the Housing Act in 2004 to address tenancy concerns from both groups. However, such interaction has been limited not just on the question of tenancy and TRAs but on issues related to supply, construction and delivery of accommodation. This distance is reflected by the fact that one reason for the lack of take up of the Government grant for sites and resulting underspend was a reluctance on the part of established registered social landlords to extend their services from mainstream housing into site management.

Gypsy and Traveller interests could benefit from learning how TRAs have empowered tenants and residents, upskilled the excluded and played an active role in improving access to services and regenerating communities. As noted, Dale Farm Housing Association has been the first tentative attempt by Gypsies and Travellers to form a Housing Association. Gypsies and Travellers could benefit from the experience of Black and minority ethnic (BME) housing associations established from the 1970s to meet the specific needs of new communities who often, like Gypsies and Travellers, were excluded from accommodation through discrimination (Mullins, 2010). In turn the wider housing lobby, in particular those sections focusing on community empowerment and social housing, could extend their commitment to inclusion and diversity through greater co-operation and partnership with Gypsy and Traveller interests.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

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 area for Coalition Government social policy 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

<sup>9</sup> The toolkit can be downloaded from the FFT website: <http://www.gypsy-traveller.org/>

<sup>10</sup> An important sign of this process beginning to take place is that a seminar on TRAs hosted by FFT in February 2012 involved the Tenants Participation Advisory Service, who gave advice on forming TRAs.

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 community engagement across a wide social spectrum 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 that warrant long term and intensive support may not always best be served by a procurement and commercial funding agenda, a growing facet of the Big Society (Alcock, 2010).

The TRAs and residents' groups featured in TSRC Working Paper 84 hold examples of Gypsies and Travellers playing dynamic roles in these forums, adapting skills, developing new ones and becoming aware of the potential for change, a process termed by Freire as critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970). However, this process was not independent and autonomous but was facilitated by external agencies, primarily third sector groups, demonstrating the role and value of this sector in inclusive community development. As noted these external groups have focused on helping tenants deal with their concerns, highlighting the value of development funding which avoids an assimilationist or behaviour and culture changing agenda which has been a feature of some donor driven initiatives (Shukra, 2011). The omens for such an enabling funding and policy agenda do not at present appear to be good as funding opportunities become more short term and or are tied to service delivery and outcomes

As part of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, the European Union is calling upon member states to submit national action plans to reverse Gypsy, Roma, Traveller exclusion (European Commission, 2011). The Roma Framework is seeking to promote innovative policy directions encompassing community development, partnership, social enterprise and policies to tackle segregation and spatial exclusion. A commitment by the UK government in its national action plan for the Framework to promote Traveller TRAs, would signal a commitment to empowerment for this minority. However, the UK Government has decided not to submit a strategy and has asked the European Commission to await the outcomes of an interministerial working group looking at Gypsies and Travellers (Roma in the UK not included). The working group is being chaired by cabinet minister Eric Pickles MP (Hansard, 2012). However, it would appear that the Coalition Government has not actively consulted Gypsy and Traveller groups, as the European Commission has advised member states to do in the framing of strategies (EC, 2011). UK Gypsy and Traveller groups have complained about a lack of consultation (Ryder et al., 2012). Clearly this does not bode well for the possibilities of inclusive models of community development being promoted in which TRAs and other forums play a driving role in the design and delivery of policies to tackle the exclusion as outlined in this paper.

There is an ever present danger of social policy lapsing into 'civilising' projects which have often been directed at Gypsies and Travellers (Powell, 2010, where outsiders, both hostile and well meaning, have sought to impose templates upon this minority based upon patterns of living which

reflect the mores and values of the mainstream. The absence of negotiation and power over the direction of such strategies has invariably led to their rejection by Gypsies and Travellers (Ryder and Greenfields/ITMB, 2010). Often the consequence of these failed experiments is to affirm the prejudices of the designers who contend failure was born from the fact that these groups do not want to abandon a way of life which is at odds with that of the mainstream (Liegoise, 2007). It is important to pose the question therefore whether TRAs fall into this train of assimilationist experimentation.

The answer has to be yes and no. As outlined in this paper there are many impediments to the development of TRAs and much external support is needed at the outset. There is a danger that if sight is lost of a genuine and inclusive community development model that TRAs will be nothing more than mouthpieces of the agencies supporting them. This may particularly be the case where community development is hierarchical and set to the agenda of outsiders (Toomey, 2009). 'Modernising' capacity building agendas can disempower communities (Kenny and Clark, 2010) and cultural difference can be perceived as a weakness and lead unfairly to blame being apportioned to cultural traits (Gilchrist and Taylor, 2011). However, inclusive community development can be deemed as being 'restorative of autonomy' (Craig et al., 2011). In this process the gaining of new technical skills and even professional approaches should not be dismissed. These can be important tools in radical transformative change (Shaw, 2008). Such skills will be especially required where TRAs take on roles in site management and the development of economic and regenerative ventures, which would constitute forms of 'citizen control and delegated power' (Arnstein, 1969), thus providing new opportunities to articulate cultural, economic and social aspirations.

Adaptation can be on the terms of Gypsies and Travellers. The dynamics of change can be centred on concepts such as mutualism and collectivity which, as noted, have been at the essence of the Traveller economy and wider Gypsy and Traveller cultural and social practices. Inclusive community development does not adopt a 'deficit model' of the excluded or deem cultural difference to be a weakness but instead as an asset upon which new survival strategies can be built to enable communities to be autonomous (Craig et al., 2011). The potential roles envisaged for TRAs in this paper are in tune with the principles of 'Asset Based Community Development' - an approach to community-based development, based on appreciating and mobilising individual and community talents, skills and assets which can include social and cultural assets (Carnegie Trust, 2005). It is also community-led development rather than driven by external agencies (Henderson and Vercsey, 2010). It could be argued that Gypsies and Travellers can secure, through modernized NGOs and TRAs political goals important to their community. Goals which include culturally appropriate accommodation and new and renewed economic enterprises but also respect and understanding from wider communities. The alternative as presented by an ongoing shortage of sites, social and spatial exclusion and decline in the Traveller economy will undoubtedly pose a much greater threat of assimilation, cultural erosion and or isolation.

The dynamics of cultural and social change will deliver a degree of acculturation whereby many traditional practices, norms and values associated with Gypsy and Traveller identity are adapted and reinterpreted. Ethnic identity is not a static phenomenon; change and adaptation is a natural process and one which in many respects Gypsies and Travellers have been extremely adept at through a

process of cultural borrowing 'bricolage' (Okely, 1997). This process of cultural and organisational adaptation contains many challenges and difficult transitions, changes which can risk assimilation if change and adaptation is not mediated (Liegoise, 2007). In this discussion about the acquisition of technical and organisational expertise, one should not fall into the trap of denigrating more informal forms of self-help (Williams, 2005). As noted, community development can be predicated on bonding social capital and traditional coping mechanism but should also work alongside traditional and informal forms of support where they have relevance and meaning for the community itself.

Debates and notions on social inclusion policies and Gypsies and Travellers have tended to gravitate to a welfarist and paternalist approach which can disempower this minority. New policy agendas being promoted have given impetus and support to more flexible and inclusive services that involve users in decision making processes and delivery (Cabinet Office, 2010, Alcock, 2010). Thus policy makers should be sympathetic to the potential of TRAs playing an active role in reversing social exclusion for Gypsies and Travellers. Change and innovation needs to come not just from Gypsies and Travellers themselves but centres of power and authority who too often in the past have sought (either intentionally or unintentionally) to disempower, assimilate and marginalise.

**For further analysis see TSRC Working 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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### **Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessments**

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## Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.



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