

The Gypsy & Traveller Law Reform Coalition Annual Report

Introduction

This is the first annual report of the Gypsy & Traveller Law Reform Coalition (G&TLRC). The G&TLRC is an alliance of individual Gypsies and Travellers and Gypsy and Traveller organisations. It is an inclusive umbrella group and includes Romany Gypsies, Irish Travellers and new Travellers, who are united in a campaign to promote the Traveller Law Reform Bill and other related law reform. The G&TLRC is supported by Liberty and the Churches' Commission for Racial Justice, amongst others.

With assistance from the Travellers Aid Trust (reg. charity 299463), the G&TLRC secured three year funding from Comic Relief to employ a National Policy Development Worker, who came into post in October 2003. The objectives for the first year of funding were as follows:

1. To bring about positive changes in the law in relation to the basic needs of the Gypsy and Traveller community
2. To increase awareness of and support within the Traveller community of the G&TLRC and its work
3. To increase support and awareness of the Traveller Law Reform Bill

These objectives were undertaken in a range of different ways throughout the year and are outlined below.

The Year 2003-2004

1/ Housing Bill

The year's parliamentary work has focused on the passing through Parliament of the Housing Bill and the promotion of the Commission for Racial Equality's drafted amendments. In October, at a fringe event organised by the Institute for Public Policy Research, a campaign alliance was forged between the G&TLRC, CRE, Children's Society and Shelter which has helped mainstream Gypsy/Traveller issues and has focused on the Housing Bill. The sentiments of this alliance were framed into an Early Day Motion which gathered support from 118 MPs.

During the year, the All Party Parliamentary Group for Traveller Law Reform expanded in numbers and activism. This included a major speech by Kevin McNamara MP in the 2nd reading of the Housing Bill. Karen Buck MP also moved clauses to the Housing Bill in committee in the Commons and John Battle MP led an adjournment debate calling for a statutory duty. In the Lords, Lord Avebury and Baroness Whitacker moved clauses at the committee/report stage. Andrew Ryder, the G&TLRC National Policy Development Officer, provided briefing notes for this work and general support.

Recommended objectives for 2004-2005

- (i) *If the Government does not introduce a statutory duty, persuade an MP to introduce a Private Members' Bill.*
- (ii) *Promote the national petition calling for a duty*
- (iii) *Use more media focused events to attract publicity re a national tour of councils with a poor record of helping Travellers.*

Work with the Commission for Racial Equality

The CRE's support for the Housing Bill clauses has been extremely important as has the support given by Trevor Phillips (CRE chair). However, there remain serious concerns about the CRE's performance regarding case work related to Gypsies and Travellers.

Recommended objectives for 2004-2005

- (i) *Continue to play an active role in the CRE strategy Steering Group*
- (ii) *Monitor developments in relation to the merger of the CRE into a single equalities body and any implications this might have on Gypsies and Travellers.*
- (iii) *Lobby the CRE Safer Communities Initiative to take more interest in the tensions between the settled and Traveller community.*

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister Policy Review

The G&TLRC actively engaged in the policy review into Gypsy/Traveller accommodation and developed detailed policy positions on social inclusion, accommodation and planning. Representatives from the G&TLRC met ministers and civil servants in a number of meetings and as a consequence, better links and understanding have been forged but these need to be strengthened and built upon.

Recommended objectives for 2004-2005

- (i) *Seek a greater number of meetings with civil servants and ministers and to increase our focus on the Home Office.*
- (ii) *Continue, if necessary, to lobby for a Task Force*

The Grass Roots

The G&TLRC held a number of open events and two large conferences in Birmingham and London, each attracted about 250 delegates. Following its success, it is anticipated that a number of conferences will be held during 2004-2005. There has been a growing trend to greatly increase Traveller involvement with regards to speaking at G&TLRC events. However, the demands of the policy review sometimes hindered the staging of other meetings involving the grassroots.

Recommended objectives for 2004-2005

- (i) *As agreed, hold quarterly open meetings*
- (ii) *Continue to develop the newsletter*
- (iii) *Give activists a greater role re the petition/lobbying their MP*
- (iv) *Increase Irish Traveller/New Traveller involvement*
- (v) *As agreed, bring three new groups onto the committee on a one year rotation basis*
- (vi) *Hold a workshop for Women Traveller activists*
- (vii) *Increase the number of regional activities we are involved in*
- (viii) *Hold an annual meeting on the 18th of November at which this report will be presented to members*
- (ix) *Expand our website to have a youth and women's section*

The North/Scotland

Andrew Ryder has made a number of visits to the north to meet northern based organisations. The G&TLRC insisted that two of the ODPM workshops were in Derby and Liverpool. At our conference, successful workshops were held on the need for more northern groups and Gypsy/Traveller issues in Scotland. The G&TLRC consulted a number of northern organisations and with Comic Relief, drafted a bid for a pilot project based in the North to develop more Traveller groups.

Recommended objectives for 2004-2005

- (i) *Support the creation of a Scottish G&TLRC and Scottish Traveller Law Reform Bill*
- (ii) *Continue to support the Northern Network of Traveller groups*
- (iii) *Assist where needed with the North pilot project*

Evictions

Whereas the G&TLRC is funded to focus on policy change, it is the task of frontline organisations to monitor evictions and give direct support to those in need. Individual member groups within the coalition such as Friends Families and Travellers, The Community Law Partnership, National Association of Gypsy Women etc have played such a role. The G&TLRC welcomes the fact that FFT and the Irish Traveller Movement and others will work together in future to coordinate a pool of observers at evictions and notes that an important discussion paper by Chris Johnson of the Community Law Partnership believes that barricades and fires at evictions are counterproductive. For its part, the G&TLRC called for a moratorium on evictions and a land swap exchange scheme to avoid eviction.

Recommended objectives for 2004-2005

- (i) *Continue to make politicians and opinion formers aware of the cost and trauma of eviction*
- (ii) *Continue to call for a moratorium and research further into the practicalities of a land exchange programme.*

Management/Organisation

The G&TLRC has had a busy but successful year and the committee/policy development work has extended their understanding of policy and organisational matters.

Recommended objectives for 2004-2005

- (i) *Continue to rotate the chair – developing committee skills*
- (ii) *Encourage affiliated groups to democratise and expand and access the Comic Relief small Traveller group's grants*

Conflict Reconciliation

In areas like Firle and Cottenham, the G&TLRC has been engaged in conflict reconciliation, which has assisted in the emergence of a consensus at a local level as well as led to support for agreed national policy positions. Norman Baker MP and the leader of Lewes Council endorsed our early day motion and the Cottenham Residents' Association signed a statement calling for a duty on councils to provide/facilitate sites.

Recommended objectives for 2004-2005

- (i) *Continue such work where it will assist national campaign work*
- (ii) *Work with the Church Synod and Catholic Church to develop church support for our policies and the role of the church in conflict reconciliation in places where there are tensions between the settled and Traveller community. It may be profitable to also look at the use of church land in some of these issues.*

If your group is not a member of the G&TLRC but wishes to join contact Andrew Ryder:

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