

TLRP Annual Report for 2007 – 08

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Introduction

Following the disbanding of the Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform Coalition (G&TLRC) in April 2006, Friends Families and Travellers, The Gypsy Council, The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain and the London Gypsy and Traveller Unit wanted to establish a way of continuing the valuable work on law reform achieved by the Coalition. These four organisations agreed to set up the Traveller Law Reform Project (TLRP).

This project aims to help bring about positive changes in the law in relation to the rights and needs of all Travelling People, including Romany Gypsies, Irish Travellers and New Travellers, and to monitor the implementation of current legislation.

Comic Relief has provided funding, administered by Travellers Aid Trust, for two years for the employment of a part-time Policy Development Officer, who began work in mid-February 2007. The Policy Development Officer is Richard Solly, who previously worked at the Churches' Commission for Racial Justice (CCRJ).

TLRP works closely with the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Traveller Law Reform. TLRP's Policy Development Officer acts as Administrative Assistant to this All Party Parliamentary Group.

TLRP also aims to work co-operatively with other Gypsy and Traveller organisations working towards common goals, particularly those within the National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups, which also grew out of the G&TLRC.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform

The provision of an administrative assistant to the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform has, according to APPG Chair Julie Morgan MP, revitalised the group.

Meetings were held in May 2007 on the progress and quality of Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessments and in July on the work of the Commission for Racial Equality on Gypsy and Traveller issues and the preparations for the handover to the new Equality and Human Rights Commission.

In June, the APPG met with officials from the Department of Communities and Local Government on the issue of security of tenure on local authority Gypsy and Traveller sites.

TLRP helped to arrange Gypsy and Traveller representation at each of these meetings in co-operation with the National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups.

TLRP encouraged APPG members and others to sign an Early Day Motion on Gypsy and Traveller site provision, tabled early in 2007.

The APPG's AGM was held in October.

Later in October, the APPG hosted the parliamentary launch of researcher Jo Richardson's report *Contentious Spaces*, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, on Gypsy and Traveller site provision. TLRP helped to organise the event and to ensure Gypsy and Traveller representation at it.

During the autumn, the Housing and Regeneration Bill was introduced into Parliament, proposing to give security of tenure to residents of local authority Gypsy and Traveller sites by bringing them within the remit of the Mobile Homes Act. TLRP assisted Julie Morgan MP in preparing her speech for Second Reading in the House of Commons. TLRP also briefed APPG member Andy Slaughter MP who has been part of the Commons Committee examining the Bill in detail. The Policy Development Officer is in touch with the APPG on Park Home Sites in order to understand more about how the Mobile Homes Act 1983 might affect residents of local authority Gypsy and Traveller sites.

TLRP assisted in briefing Baroness Whitaker and Lord Avebury on the Olympic Park Gypsy and Traveller site removals, about which they have spoken several times in the House of Lords. In December, the APPG met with the London Development Agency and the Olympic Delivery Authority to express their concern about the manner in which these removals had been handled. This elicited an apology – albeit a badly presented apology – to affected site residents by the ODA.

In January, the APPG met with the new Minister with responsibility for Gypsy and Traveller issues, Iain Wright MP. As a result, a full debate is to be held on the findings of the report of the Task Group on Gypsy and Traveller Site Provision and Enforcement, which was published in December.

The TLRP Policy Development Officer assisted the National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups and European Dialogue in arranging a policy seminar for APPG members in March 2008.

The TLRP Policy Development Officer has kept in regular contact with APPG Chair Julie Morgan, Secretary Lord Avebury and Vice Chairs Tim Boswell and Baroness Whitaker. News is sent by email to all 38 APPG members, on average once a week during parliamentary terms. These mailings alert members to issues of concern, including items of parliamentary business such as Adjournment Debates in which Gypsy and Traveller matters are to be discussed.

TLRP also produced briefings for MPs and others on the Final Report of the Equalities Review, the London Mayor's Draft Supplementary Guidance for the London Plan, CLG's proposed amendments to the Temporary Stop Notice regulations, planning policy and site provision, the Discrimination Law Review, the Housing Green Paper, the Planning Reform White Paper and the Housing and Regeneration Bill, all of which are on the TLRP website.

Communities and Local Government

The Policy Development Officer also keeps in close touch with the Department for Communities and Local Government Gypsy and Traveller Unit and discusses issues of concern with them. He has attended CLGGTU's national consultations and stakeholders' meetings. He is lobbying CLG to encourage the department to pressure local authorities to take their responsibilities under the Housing Act 2004 and ODPM Circular 1/06 seriously and working with others to find strategies for dealing with the organised resistance of some local authorities to making the necessary site provision.

Equality Commissions

The Policy Development Officer met with officials from the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) during the period that it was preparing to hand over its responsibilities to the new Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and participated in consultations with both Commissions over the content of the Discrimination Law Review, which may form the basis of the proposed new Single Equalities Bill and which is, in the view of TLRP and many other groups, deeply flawed.

The Policy Development Officer has since met with the EHRC officers responsible for work with Gypsies and Travellers and is lobbying to ensure that adequate resources are dedicated to this area of the Commission's work and that it builds on the work of the former CRE in scrutinising the activities of local authorities and enforcing the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000.

Other organisations

The Policy Development Officer has built up a good working relationship with the Local Government Association's Gypsy and Traveller group through its Chair, Richard Bennett, and is in the process of creating links with the National Farmers Union and the Country Land and Business Association.

Security of tenure

TLRP collected signatures on a national petition calling for security of tenure. This was begun before the Government announced in November that it would include security of tenure on the Housing and Regeneration Bill. Collection of signatures continued as a way of emphasising the importance of the issue, and the petition was handed in to 10 Downing Street by Gypsy and Traveller representatives on Tuesday 11 March.

The Government has introduced security of tenure on local authority sites in the Housing and Regeneration Bill currently (March 2008) being debated in Parliament. It has proposed to do this by applying the Mobile Homes Act 1983 to local authority Gypsy and Traveller sites, as this was legislatively easier than bringing forward dedicated legislation bringing tenancy agreements on local authority Gypsy and Traveller sites into line with social housing tenancy agreements. There are concerns as to the appropriateness of the Mobile Homes Act for this purpose but it is clear that the Minister is listening sympathetically to

the representations made by TLRP and other organisations, and some of the more regrettable impacts of applying the Mobile Homes Act may as a result be avoided.

Site provision

The Policy Development Officer works closely with the planning research officer at TLRP member group FFT as he monitors the progress, quality and implementation of Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessments (GTAAAs) and Regional Spatial Strategies across the country, and with an FFT Trustee who is monitoring and responding to developments in the South West region. He attends the regular meetings of the London Gypsy and Traveller Forum, which is monitoring the Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation assessment for the Greater London region, and has contributed to discussions on the East of England Regional Spatial Strategy, which is the furthest advanced of all the regions.

It is clear that in some places the process of determining need is being pursued honestly and efficiently. In others it is not, and the quality of GTAAAs is poor. Some local authorities seem disposed to fulfil the need revealed by their GTAA and others are resisting such action by every means at their disposal. This is highly regrettable and common strategies must be found for countering it. This task, involving as it does challenging deeply held popular prejudices, is beyond the capacity of one part time worker to complete in one year: it needs effective alliances involving as many agencies as possible, and TLRP is working hard to build these alliances.

Site visits

The Policy Development Officer has made site visits at Stodmarsh in Kent (small privately owned Gypsy and Irish Traveller site), Dale Farm in Essex (Irish Traveller large unauthorised development), Star Hill in Hampshire (medium sized local authority Gypsy site) and Parkway Crescent in London (medium sized local authority Gypsy site constructed for former residents of the Clays Lane site, from which they were removed to make way for the Olympic Park development). A planned visit to New Travellers at the Big Green Gathering in Somerset in August was aborted on arrival because of a medical emergency, the continuing effects of which have delayed the programme of further site visits which was planned.

Christian Churches

The Policy Development Officer attends meetings of the Travellers' Issues Working Group of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. He works with the Church Network for Gypsies and Travellers, a small inter-church network of Christian clergy and church workers involved with Gypsies and Travellers, to increase awareness of Gypsy and Traveller issues within the Churches and, especially in rural areas, to try to use the central role of the Church of England to increase understanding between Travelling and settled communities and defuse tension between them. This process is slow, but educational events have been held so far in Maidstone, Cambridge and Salisbury and it is hoped that further events will be held this spring in Essex and Suffolk and later in Worcestershire.