

## Give Us A Voice: Gypsies and Travellers make it real

A story of empowerment

MARCH 2009

The Give Us A Voice project (GUAV) is a link between Gypsies and Travellers and agencies. It works with community members to empower them to work together and to have a voice which is heard and recognised.

Parallel to this GUAV works with agencies to raise awareness and the profile of the communities and to help agencies to adapt the way they deliver their services to ensure they are culturally appropriate. This work is particularly important for statutory agencies as they need to work to the Race Relations act.

Here Violet Tucker tells her story of Gypsy and Traveller empowerment.



### Let's imagine...

Let's imagine that we live on a mobile home park, any mobile home park, it can be one of those nice ones with views of the dales or the Lake District or it can be a private Gypsy and Traveller site, and just about almost everything in between. Remember the word almost.

Right are we all on in our caravans gazing out the windows taking in the scenery, nice warm drink in our hands, safe in the knowledge that our rights as tenants are protected by the Mobile Homes Act 1983, that our rents can not be unreasonably raised, that our surrounding need to be kept in a reasonable state, that our landlords need to ensure that we have access to suitable fire safety equipment. That we can't be evicted with out the correct steps being followed.

Now isn't that comforting?

Ok so we are going to change the scene slightly, we are now on a Local Authority Gypsy/Traveller Site, we still have the warm drink, but the view will most certainly be different. Usually close to a motorway or a rubbish tip, but if your really lucky, just a industrial estate. If we live near the concrete factory, you see the dust is rising and swirling with the wind, dancing across the site, leaving a lovely reminder of its dance.

Oh yeah, and that warm comforting feeling from the Mobile Homes Act no longer applies, because in that Act it excludes local authority Gypsy and Traveller sites. Ok so we are protected under the housing act then. Nope Afraid Not.

At this moment in time the rules for Gypsy and Traveller sites are not set in acts, but within the judgement of the local authority.

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## Closer to home

So let's move to somewhere close to home, lets say Doncaster. Well we are all really lucky because our site has really reasonable rents. It's only around £30 per week, much better than other areas.

As I work I am really happy with that rent,

Are you all happy with that rent? Not bad at all is it?

However Aunty Mary (She isn't our real Aunty, but we would be considered very rude Gypsies, if we didn't refer to our elder as aunt or uncle) isn't so happy. She's is a 75 year old widow, who is wheelchair bound, lovely old lady. She is a very stereotypical Gypsy, lots of long plaits all arranged on her head, a long skirt skimming her toes, and just darker than olive toned.

Well Aunty Mary is claiming benefits, as are a number of other people on our site and the other council ones in Doncaster. The benefits agency is refusing to pay the full amount, they haven't done for a number of years. So Aunty Mary has to find £4-5 a week.... But she doesn't.

You see Doncaster employs someone to collect the rents off the sites, and Aunty Mary tell us that she doesn't need to make up the difference, because the nice rent collector told her not to worry about it. When I ask others, they say the same. A few years pass, people change jobs, including me, now in the Gypsy and Traveller Inclusion Officer at Doncaster CVS – in the Community Empowerment Network team. Nice.

## Consultation parties

I start my job by going out and well let's be honest, having a coffee with people. We talk through issues, we discuss life and we get some small things changed.

At the same time, I am getting to know influential people nationally and educating myself in the policies and issues. It difficult at times, Gypsies and Travellers are very proud, self sufficient people, to ask for help is to show weakness, so quite a bit of the work I do, gets done without Gypsies and Travellers actually asking for help, but from conversations which highlight problems. This also makes it difficult to celebrate our achievements. It is also very difficult to get a few of them in a room together to talk about issues, because we are a very private people.

One way I get over this is to have a consultation party, we invite members from all the different Traveller communities and we give them the opportunity to talk about small universal problems together. We also set up Forum meetings in people homes – so that the meetings don't feel like meetings, just chats, but again we talk about what is comfortable and we gets small things changed, like the council to come along and clean the entrance to one site.

## Finding the facts

Well one day a few months later I get a call, a frantic one. Aunty Mary has got a letter, she is to be evicted if she doesn't start immediately paying the £4-5 a week and find the means to pay the back rent for the last 5 years. The letter has apparently gone to everyone else in the same situation.

What to do, what to do. This is a learning curve for me too, you know. They think because I can read and write that I know everything about everything. I set up a meeting on the site, in Aunty Mary's shed as she was the one who rang. And we get a number of people all saying the same thing - at the same time I might add. So I let them vent and then we try to have a structured meeting.

### So here are the facts:

- » They have not been paying the rent deficit.
- » They all maintain the rent collector told them not to worry about it.
- » None of them have this on paper.
- » None of them can afford the back rent.
- » They can all be evicted in 28 days without the opportunity to state their case because they are not tenants but licensees, thanks to the exclusion in the Mobile Home Act.
- » And the final fact
- » We have a problem.

As part of my role is to be a pair of writing hands and reading eyes, I tell everyone that I don't know the answer, that the council probably can evict them and as they have breached their licenses and have every right to. But I do know a little about the Human Rights Act and that I think we may have a case. I finish by telling them I will go away and research the issues and build on some relationships within the council. I leave the worried tenants with finding any relevant letters (most have been thrown straight in the bin) and to keep any new ones they receive.

## Friends and Allies

After a few informal meetings with the council, I find a lot of friends and one unfriend. One tells me that they will just evict those who have not and will not pay, that they don't believe the tenants have been told not to pay. However the other tells me we will see what we can do. In the meantime, I keep everyone informed and I also continue with my education. I attend a course on Gypsy and Traveller Law, and an interesting sentence keeps popping up - it's not about what I was dealing with directly, but it could help. The sentence is "they set a precedent" (it a legal term that means doing something a lot or over a long period of time). You see whilst trying to get some sort of written proof that they had been told to not pay the deficit; we were over looking the obvious.

DMBC had always employed someone to collect the rents. That same person had not taken the deficit for a number of years, it doesn't matter whether or not they had been told not to pay the deficit, the precedent had been set over the past years. The council had let them all live there for numerous years without paying the deficient. The tenants of the sites had kept telling me everything I needed to know, and I told them so. Now I don't know if the word was used correctly, but after I informed



the residents, they began using the wording, I also mentioned it whilst having conversations with DMBC. The friends at DMBC take lots of notes and nod a bit and say they will keep me informed.

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## From small successes...

During this time other things pop up, we work with DMBC on a funding bid to renovate the sites, we also highlight some omissions from a piece of research, which we work together on and put right before it can be highlighted externally and we work on trying to get the sites in line with a piece of legislation which is pending, like taking the words “Caravan site” out of the addresses and pulling them in line with bricks and mortar housing.

We decided to bide our time and wait for DMBC to get back to us. We have built up good working relationships and we trust that nods and promises will not be taken back....

It went very quite for a while.....

Then out of nowhere we received a pleasant surprise. Our trust had been well placed.

Aunty Mary rang me to let me know, what all their hard work had accomplished.

A letter telling everyone on benefits, that as of that week, Housing Benefit would cover the full cost of ground rent and that they would be backdating everyone’s claim, so those that had been paying the deficit , would be receiving a payment,

So we had one win, with a few more following suit. The council planning department approached us to assist with their site allocation policy and they now have working links with the Doncaster strategic partnership.

And all of you who are still sat in your trailer looking at the dancing dust, will be pleased to know that because of consultations with Communities and Local Government – in which Gypsies and Travellers from Doncaster were directly involved, the little exclusion for local authority sites, will no longer apply. Because they get a mention in the Housing and Regeneration Act of 2008<sup>1</sup>. That’s the little piece of legislation mentioned earlier.

**...And they lived happily ever after.**

<sup>1</sup> The Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 will apply the Mobile Homes Act 1983 to local authority Gypsy and Traveller sites.

For the Regional Empowerment Partnership contact:  
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More VOICES are available on the regional empowerment website: [www.yhep.org.uk](http://www.yhep.org.uk)

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