

Speech for the Neighbourhoods Policy Seminar

Good afternoon,

Trevor Phillips, Chair of the CRE, believes that for Travellers:

‘...Great Britain is still like the American Deep South for black people in the 1950s. Extreme levels of public hostility exist in relation to Gypsies and Travellers – fuelled in part by irresponsible media reporting of the kind that would be met with outrage if it was targeted at any other ethnic group. We know that the levels of discrimination they face cut across all indices of deprivation and discrimination. This applies to availability and quality of accommodation, educational attainment, health status, employment profile and contact with the criminal justice system.’

I wish to thank the Runnymede Trust for inviting me to participate in this ‘Neighbourhoods’ Seminar.

My overview of legislative changes that have led to inequalities in relation to Irish Traveller accommodation will, due to time limitations, be brief. I have chosen the area of accommodation, as it is fundamental to improved access to health and education.

I will also share with you a community engagement approach being developed by ITM which aims to tackle these inequalities, and promote cohesion locally.

2.

Government legislation, policy and practice relating to Travellers’ accommodation needs have proved disastrous since their beginnings in 1960.

In 1994, the 1968 Caravan Sites Act was repealed under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which ended the duty on local authorities to provide sites. The Government stated that Irish Travellers and Gypsies should provide their own sites. Many did then, and continue to buy their own land and apply for

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retrospective planning permission. However, the refusal rate for their planning applications runs at a level of 90% in comparison to 20% for the 'settled' community. Therefore, occupation of land that has been legally purchased but is as yet without planning permission is seen as an unauthorised encampment.

The July 2003 national bi-annual count of Gypsy caravans published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister shows that of the 14,705 caravans reported, 3,979 (27%) were camped in an unauthorised manner. The inhabitants of these caravans are therefore statutorily homeless.

The costs of dealing with unauthorised sites are estimated at £18 million pounds per annum – an unsustainable use of resources. Such resources would represent 'best value' for money by being spent on facilitating the development of more Residential and Transit Sites.

It is important to note that the law in relation to homelessness assessments has been clarified in the case of *Margaret Price v Carmarthenshire* in which the judge held that, in certain circumstances, where there is a sufficient degree of cultural aversion to conventional housing, the local authority should use their best endeavours to facilitate a Traveller way of life.

3.

The major flaw in government legislation was that responsibility for providing sites was devolved to Local Authorities, with the result that local settled interests subverted the legislation's original intentions. Also, provision was nowhere near adequate to fulfil demand, leading to overcrowding and permanent occupation of sites, which forced many Travellers into unsuitable settled accommodation.

Tenure conditions, management and service provision for sites has often been inadequate and insensitive to residents' needs: 70% of Travellers live on unsuitable land, on industrial land, adjacent to dumps, railway lines, heavy-duty electricity pylons, etc.

Homelessness and all the stresses it produces have become a major issue for Travellers now denied a nomadic lifestyle through

the impact of legislation. Significant barriers inhibit their access to suitable housing. Throughout the housing system, Traveller women suffer some very culturally specific types of discrimination – for being women, Travellers, Irish, and often having large families. Poor literacy and insensitive institutional procedures create further barriers between Travellers and their accommodation needs.

Some Irish Travellers have responded to the dearth of suitable accommodation by buying their own plots of land, but have been hindered in their occupancy of this land by sedentary objections to planning permission. Most traditional stopping places don't exist anymore, so Travellers have little option but to camp illegally on private and publicly owned land if they are to remain nomadic. This has again brought Travellers into conflict with Local Authorities and the police, thus criminalising many Travellers and forcing many more into inappropriate housing where severe mental and physical stress can occur.

4.

ITM welcomes the requirement on local authorities to carry out housing needs assessments within the Housing Act 2004, and as referred to within the 'Improving Opportunities, Strengthening Communities' Report. In addition, accommodation for Travellers should be appropriately designed to meet their extended family and economic needs.

Central and local governments should consider providing a variety of site provision, ranging from a national network of temporary halting or transit sites to good quality, well-located and sensitively planned and managed private and public permanent sites.

Policy changes that need to be implemented include:

- Reintroduction of a statutory and funded duty on Local Authorities to provide adequate and appropriate sites for all Travellers and Gypsies, or an equivalent enabling and enforcement mechanism that achieves the same policy objective;
- Repeal of the Anti-nomadic sections of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, as they serve to criminalise Irish Travellers.

Accommodation policies should be informed and developed in an integrated way that takes into account the specific health, cultural, educational, economic, and training needs of Travellers. A coordinated, holistic approach to these interrelated needs is required, taking into account that for many Travellers their accommodation space is also their workplace.

5.

Currently, Irish Traveller engagement with local authority accommodation services is tokenistic and very limited throughout the UK. There is a lack of structured Irish Traveller-led participation initiatives. Irish Travellers feel intimidated by professional cultures and lack awareness of the workings of the accommodation system. Irish Travellers, who have been involved with services, have been left unsupported and isolated; have not experienced timely outcomes to their involvement and, consequently, have lost interest.

Inter-agency networking, planning and cooperation needs to be encouraged in order to develop more sensitive Irish Traveller related policies and practices through engagement with dedicated voluntary sector organisations.

One recent example of this kind of approach has been developed on the Westway Travellers' site in West London. On this site a 'Sure Start' programme has been set up to improve child care and support for families with children aged under 4, and a "UK On-Line" programme to improve information technology access for economically and socially disadvantaged communities, among others. A range of innovative educational initiatives has been instigated through a combination of strong site leadership and the involvement of the Catholic Children's Society and other agencies to develop a comprehensive, culturally sensitive support package.

6.

Influenced by the success of the Westway inter-agency forum, and informed by visits to Traveller sites nationally, ITM applied to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Innovation into Action grants programme and Community Chest to develop the recently commenced London Development Project.

Irish Traveller participation is being developed and supported within local authority tenancy planning and development in the London Boroughs of Hillingdon, Brent and Haringey. Such Boroughs have been identified because of their:

- High Irish Traveller populations
- Current condition of these boroughs' Traveller sites
- Uncertainty over the future of the sites
- High numbers of Irish Travellers living in temporary housing
- Neighbourhood tensions

In order to facilitate the establishment of successful inter-agency forums, ITM initiated and continues to build a trusted relationship with Irish Travellers based at the identified local authority sites and in local authority housing, and currently has 50% Traveller participation within its Inter-agency forums as a core value.

In addition to the Irish Traveller residents, the inter-agency framework includes representatives from Housing Departments, Primary Care Trusts, Environmental Health and Community Safety Departments, Traveller Education Services, Traveller Health Workers and local voluntary groups.

ITM engages with each borough separately, providing intensive facilitation sensitive to local requirements. It is anticipated that all parties will require suitable training and development for effective joint working. ITM will actively identify appropriate training for Irish Travellers from local agencies, such as the local Councils for Voluntary Service. Such training will include: representation, public speaking, assertiveness, media skills and Traveller accommodation law. Local Authority and voluntary sector staff will be offered training on Irish Traveller culture and history provided by an agency approved by Irish Travellers.

The Project aims to create a clearly defined environment where Irish Travellers and local authority housing services can engage as equal partners. The Project is also working to secure meaningful and empowering dialogue between all parties. Outcomes of Traveller participation will be tracked and results transmitted to Irish Travellers and the local authority.

Irish Traveller Movement in Britain

As the confidence and skills of Irish Travellers increase, attention will focus on developing best practice standards for publication as a 'Traveller Involvement Toolkit'. The toolkit will be disseminated nationally through established networks and will be available as a downloadable document on the Irish Traveller Movement Website, currently under development.

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