



Operation Traveller Vote

Conference Report 2014

The Traveller Movement



“The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men.”

Lyndon B. Johnson



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WHAT WAS EXPLORED AT THE 2014 CONFERENCE?

This year's conference looked at:

- the huge potential within the communities to engage and shape the political process to ensure policy addresses the needs of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers both now and in the future;
- the ability to challenge the wider discrimination and stereotypes Gypsies, Roma and Travellers experience through partnership work engaging policy makers and the media;
- how policy can ensure that the appropriate number of Traveller sites are built which meet the increasing accommodation needs of these communities and how the GRT sector can challenge Government proposals to re-define Gypsies and Travellers;
- the opportunities and challenges in accessing education, skills training and employment and how relatively small changes in policy and community development initiatives can reap huge socio-economic benefits in the long term;
- how to reduce the number of Gypsies and Travellers entering the criminal justice system and better address the factors that result in community members going to prison;
- the impact of social and environmental inequalities on health inequalities and the models of good practice where service providers are effectively addressing Gypsies', Travellers' and Roma health needs;
- promoting a better understanding of how to engage and challenge the national and local media



KEY ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The key message from a majority of speakers was that Gypsies, Travellers and Roma need to become more politically engaged and that politician's need to fully respect and consider the needs and rights of these communities. **With this in mind The Electoral Commission, organisations working with GRT and others need to work to increase the number of community members registered to vote and who actually vote; to support more community members to become politicians and activists; to increase the engagement and fair and non-discriminatory treatment of GRT by the political parties and elected members.**
2. Current Government proposals to change planning guidance for Traveller sites and the definition of Gypsies and Travellers are not practically workable; will most likely be subject to legal challenges and fail to recognise the ethnic and cultural identity of these groups. **It is critical that any new Government bring forward sustainable policy solutions that address the national shortage of sites; properly manage unauthorised encampments and recognise the ethnic and cultural identity of Gypsies and Travellers for the purposes of planning.**
3. The poor education, skills and employment outcomes experienced by Gypsies, Roma and Travellers can and in some cases are being effectively addressed. **Specific emphasis needs to be placed on the need for community and family learning initiatives that support GRT children in school; improving basic literacy and numeracy skills amongst the communities and exploring different pathways to learning.**
4. Poor education, poor skills outcomes and low literacy are key factors which influence Gypsies, Roma and Travellers entering the criminal justice system. **There is an urgent need to look at how Government can better meet the literacy, educational and training needs of GRT both outside and inside the criminal justice system, to promote inclusion and reduce reoffending.**
5. Accommodation insecurity, living environment and social exclusion all negatively impact on Gypsies' and Travellers' health. **Government need to ensure the effective commissioning of health services to these communities; to update data monitoring systems and research and ensure that frontline staff have appropriate community participation and community engagement training.**
6. Gypsies, Roma and Travellers still experience negative, inaccurate and prejudiced media reporting; particularly in the press. **To address such reporting the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) need to review the effectiveness of clause 12 (discrimination) in the Editors Code of Practice and produce non-regulatory guidance to editors on Gypsy, Roma, Traveller issues.**

CHAIR AND KEYNOTE SPEAKER SUMMARIES

Pauline Anderson (*Conference Chair and TM Trustee*) and **Yvonne MacNamara** (*TM CEO*)

Yvonne and Pauline welcomed people and spoke about the relevance of this year's conference in the run up to the General Election in May 2015. Yvonne talked about TM's new Operation Traveller Vote (OTV) project and outlined its three key objectives:

1. To increase the number of Gypsies, Travellers and Roma registered to vote, who actually vote and who are politically engaged
2. To support and develop more community members to become politicians and political/community activists
3. To increase engagement and the fair and non-discriminatory treatment of these groups by the political parties and their elected members

Pauline described her identity as an Irish Traveller and an educationalist and how you can be a Gypsy and Traveller whilst engaging the institutions that govern you.



Pauline Anderson



Yvonne MacNamara



Alex Robertson

Alex Robertson

Director of Communications, The Electoral Commission

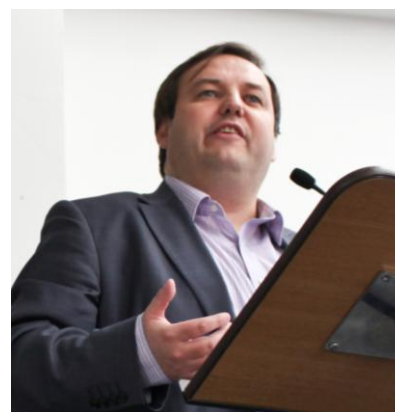
Alex Robertson talked about why politics matters and how Gypsies and Travellers can ensure that they are registered to vote and have their say in who their elected representatives are. He emphasised that we live in a representational democracy and that we need to make decisions together by choosing people to make those decisions for us. He also talked about how people are excluded from voting due to their literacy skills, lack of awareness etc and that the Electoral Commission was committed to reaching out to these groups.

Alex explained how Gypsies, Roma and Travellers can register to vote by completing the online registration process or through their local electoral service. He said people often don't realise they aren't registered as a result of moving house etc. Alex urged individuals and organisations to promote voter registration awareness, especially in and around national voter registration day on 5th February 2015.

Padraig Mac Lochlainn TD

Irish politician and Sinn Féin Spokesperson on Justice, Equality and Defence

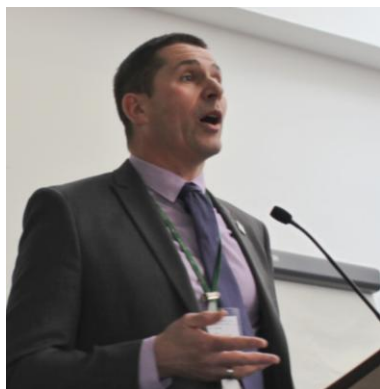
Padraig Mac Lochlainn described his own upbringing with an Irish Traveller family and the great warmth and love he experienced in his childhood. He talked about the long and distinct history Irish Travellers have in Ireland and the discrimination and obstacles they have faced such as the Commission on Itinerancy and legislation introduced in the 1960's aimed at stopping Travellers being Travellers. He said it had been and continues to be a long road towards equality and respect for Travellers and that it had taken decades to unravel discriminatory legislation introduced in the 1960's.



Padraig Mac Lochlainn

On a more positive note Padraig described how things have changed in recent years and that all political parties in Ireland are poised to recognise Irish Travellers as an ethnic minority group. He paid tribute to Brigid Quilligan and the work of the Irish Traveller Movement in breaking down mistrust, 'shattering the stereotypes of Travellers in Ireland and brining about great change.' However, he emphasised that hatred against Travellers still existed and quoted an opinion piece in the Irish Daily Mail by Brenda Power which he described as completely racist.

Padraig's key message to the conference was that 'you must get organised to make change, to make sure they hear your voice. Too many Travellers have kept their heads down and accepted the stereotypical views. If you don't vote, you don't get your voice heard.'



Jim Davies

Jim Davies

Chair of the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Police Association

Jim Davies talked about his pride in being a police officer and a Gypsy and the benefit both these aspects of his identity bring in his role as chair of the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Police Association (GRTPA). He stated that if GRT want a fairer system, then they must have a say in their own destiny. He emphasised that keeping your heads down doesn't work anymore and that from his experience many people in power want GRT to take part and be involved.

Jim described how the GRTPA are making a difference and causing people and institutions to re-think the stereotypes. He said that you have to "be in it to win it" and that GRT need to be more visible. Jim said he understood that some in the communities feared that they would lose aspects of their identity through greater integration; however he stated that 'the truth is, rather than causing the loss of identity, taking part is the only chance of keeping it.'

Sharon Hodgson MP

Labour Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities

Sharon Hodgson empathised with people who don't see the point in voting stating that she "totally understood why people don't engage in politics." She talked about her path out of poverty and into politics, describing the many hurdles she had to overcome as a young female political activist for the Labour Party. She said that if "she can make it, anyone can."



Sharon Hodgson

Sharon talked about the good things that came out of political participation such as the Sure Start Children's Centres. She stated that Gypsies and Travellers would be specifically included in Labour's Race Equality Strategy, including the inequalities they experience on accommodation issues. She also stated her commitment to challenging discrimination against Gypsies and Travellers whether it came from her own or other political parties. She outlined Labour's key policy commitments in its 2015 election campaign and said that her party wants to create one nation that brings communities together. She pledged her commitment to the work of the Equality and Human Rights Commission but accepted that the existing cuts to its budget would be difficult to reinstate overnight.

In conclusion Sharon urged Gypsies, Roma and Travellers to make sure everyone who is eligible to vote is registered and to encourage all to be politically engaged and vote. She encouraged GRT to stand as MP's and Councillors and reiterated the message delivered by other speakers that with 'no vote, you have no voice.'



Soraya Post

Soraya Post MEP

Swedish MEP for the Feminist Initiative Party

Soraya Post talked about her upbringing and being the first Roma in Swedish history to be elected to the European Parliament. She described the high levels of racism and discrimination experienced by Roma in Europe and that anti-Gypsyism is the norm, is acceptable and that until it is accepted that this state of affairs exists, solutions will not happen. She stated that "the far right political parties are using Roma issues for their own interest."

Soraya discussed the challenges faced in Europe, specifically highlighting cases in the Czech Republic where many Roma children have experienced discrimination in the education system and have been sent to special schools. She said that Roma were being used by many politicians as scapegoats for wider economic and social problems that exist.

Soraya urged those attending to get more politically engaged, stating that "when you don't vote you give your vote to the far right." She said she believed "they would win over the far right in Europe" and that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers need to be adept when engaging and challenging political parties.

Owen Neal

Department for Communities and Local Government

Owen Neal updated the conference on the Government's consultation on changes to existing planning guidance on Traveller sites. He described one of the key proposals in the Government consultation document was that "planning for Traveller sites should only be for Travellers who travel."



Owen Neal

Owen went on to outline other measures being proposed including: "making sure the housing need definition of gypsy and traveller matches the planning definition of traveller; changing Planning Policy for Traveller Sites to make sure the Green Belt and other sensitive land is given proper protection; making clear to councils that new traveller sites in open countryside should be very strictly limited." Owen summarised the other key policy changes and reminded delegates that the deadline for submissions was the 23rd November.



Josie O'Driscoll

Josie O'Driscoll

TM Advisory Group and Chair of Hertfordshire Gypsy and Traveller Empowerment

Josie O'Driscoll talked about what her identity meant to her, stating that "society gave me the name Traveller, I am a Pavee, I am an ethnic minority." She gave the conference examples of the Traveller language and stressed the point that it was for Gypsies and Travellers to define themselves, not for Government to impose definitions upon them.

Josie encouraged Gypsies and Travellers to stand up and be counted, to challenge the Government proposals and register to vote and vote in the 2015 general election.

Lord Avebury

TM Patron and Secretary of the APPG on Gypsies, Roma and Travellers

Lord Avebury strongly criticised the recent Government proposals to change planning guidance for Traveller sites, stating that “Gypsies and Travellers were being defined out of existence.” He observed that Travellers can no longer travel because there are no longer any stopping places in the country, yet the Government will require them to travel to continue to be defined as Travellers.



Lord Eric Avebury

Lord Avebury warned that if the Government proposals come into force, Travellers will disappear from local authority plans and sites that should be provided will vanish. He also talked about local authorities not properly assessing the need for Traveller sites, nor identifying where those sites can be built.



David Joyce

David Joyce

Human Rights Barrister

David Joyce talked about the new structures in Ireland to provide for the participation of minorities in the political process. He also described the system of proportional representation which ensures individual votes count more. He emphasised that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are part of society and should not be perceived as being separate.

David described the scenario where in some cases the nastier the politician was towards GRT, the more likely they were to be voted in. He said that in Ireland 10-15 years ago, GRT started getting organised and engaging and challenging political parties and that since then at election time the language has become more respectful.

WORKSHOP REPORTS

The Road Ahead: Planning and Developing Traveller Sites for the future

(Chaired by Lord Avebury, TM Patron)



The issue which dominated this workshop was the Government's recent proposal to redefine Gypsies and Travellers for the purposes of planning. Many participants were very angry with what they perceived to be an attack on the ethnic and cultural identity of Gypsies and Travellers. Some participants recommended peaceful protest in response to the Government proposals.

The workshop heard that many local Gypsy and Traveller organisations weren't aware of the consultation. Many in the workshop felt that the weakness in the consultation was symbolic of DCLG having no meaningful connection with Gypsies and Travellers. There were also concerns that parish councils would have a disproportionate influence in the consultation process.

The workshop made a number of key recommendations including reinstating the Gypsy and Traveller Unit in DCLG; abolishing the Ministerial call in of Traveller sites in the green belt; Gypsies and Travellers should always be referred to with capital letters; local authorities should continue with their plans for Traveller sites on the basis of existing policies; the planning definition of Gypsies and Travellers should be revised to include cultural identity

Working towards equality: Opportunities and challenges in Education, Skills Training and Employment

(Chaired by Sophia Vale, TM Partnerships Officer)

This workshop looked at how education, skills and employment outcomes for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers can be improved. Specific emphasis was placed on the need for community and family learning initiatives (through schools, colleges etc) that ensure formal education, skills training etc is shaped, understood and appreciated by both parents and children. With this in mind the workshop suggested that GRT families and young people need community mentors who can support, guide and encourage.



Participants also focused on the need for improving basic literacy and numeracy skills amongst the communities in order to access jobs, apprenticeships etc. They highlighted the importance of having different pathways to learning and positive but formal educational alternatives to school for those less suited to a formal academic education.

Brighter Futures: Reducing the number of Gypsies and Travellers in the Criminal Justice System

(Chaired by Mark Watson, TM Trustee)



The key issues discussed in this workshop were why and how Gypsies and Travellers enter the criminal justice system, what GRT prisoner's needs are and how we can improve outcomes/reduce offending and re-offending. The workshop learnt that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are over-represented in prisons with approximately 5% of prisoners identifying themselves as GRT. Some workshop participants attributed the high figure to a lack of education, poor literacy etc with many GRT

not being up-to-speed with legislation and consequently falling foul of the law. They also described many community members getting caught in the system through driving offences.

The workshop agreed that extra support in literacy, numeracy and wider skills training was essential to address some of the root causes of why GRT are in prison. Also discussed was the effect of death and bereavement on prisoners, especially young people, in the context of not being able to access traditional coping mechanisms such as funerals, family support etc. It was recommended that prisons should be aware of this and look into measuring its impact on mental health and wellbeing.

Health is wealth: How policy can address the needs of those most vulnerable to poor health

(Chaired by Dr Aileen Kitching, TM Trustee)

This workshop explored the social and health inequalities Gypsies and Travellers experience, and looked at how best to 'close the gap' by working across communities and Government to address the wider social determinates of health.

The workshop heard about how accommodation insecurity and the environment can negatively impact on Gypsies' and Travellers' health. It also heard about the Askern-Mexborough GP's model of good practice engaging Gypsies and Travellers in Doncaster focused on delivering a community led and tailored health service.



Key recommendations coming out of the workshop were the need to address the wider social determinates of Gypsies and Travellers (particularly accommodation); the effective commissioning of health services to these communities; to update data monitoring systems and research; and ensure that frontline staff have appropriate community participation and community engagement training.

Monstered by the media: Understanding and challenging media coverage of Gypsies and Travellers.

(Chaired by Bridy Purcell, TM Intern and Mike Doherty, TM Communications Officer)



The Media Workshop focused on negative, inaccurate and prejudiced media reporting; particularly in the press, and asked what the new press regulator can do to curtail this. The workshop heard about TM's recent complaint to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) regarding the reporting of a murder/suicide of a retired couple in Herefordshire and how this was effectively blamed on a planning application from a young Romany Gypsy woman. It was noted that the regulator found in favour

of the TM on accuracy issues and that during the resolution process, The Sun published an apology. The workshop also heard about the work of Travellers Times/Rural Media Company and their Traveller Voices project which aims to get more GRT confident and skilled in engaging and working in the media.

They also heard about the experiences of a Lancashire Romany Gypsy family, who had become targeted for abusive reporting by three national newspapers before, during and after a criminal trial of a neighbour accused of using racist and abusive language towards family members. Key recommendations from the workshop included IPSO reviewing the effectiveness of clause 12 (discrimination) in the Editors Code of Practice; supporting and promoting further initiatives that get more GRT engaged with and in the media; and for IPSO to produce non-regulatory guidance to editors on Gypsy, Roma, Traveller issues.

EVALUATION AND COMMENTS

 "Enjoyed the discussion &
 insightful comments"

 "An excellent and well
 organised event and a
 good pre election rallying
 call on GRT issues - a
 wide ranging and
 informed panel of
 speakers leading an
 interesting discussion"

 "Excellent & inspiring
 conference well done to all"

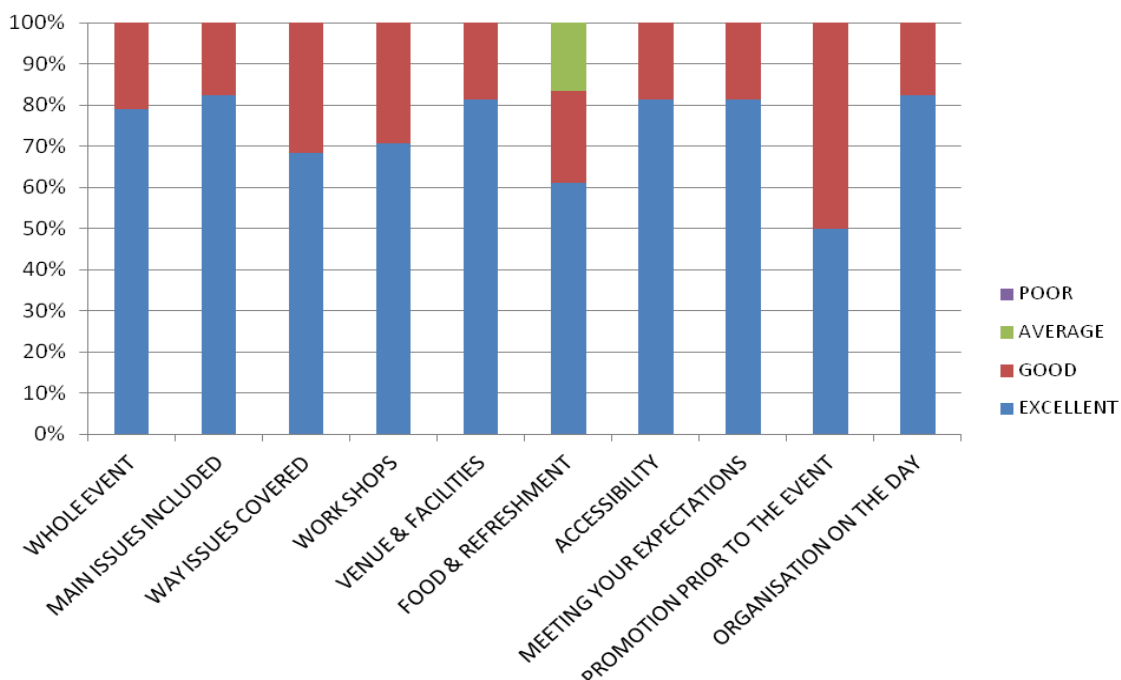
Rating of the main aspects:

Once again, the conference was a great success, according to the feedback by delegates. Overall event has been rated 'Excellent' by almost eighty per cent of the participants. Please see the chart below for more details.

We have received excellent suggestions regarding subject areas, such as: 'roadside encampments and homelessness', 'how to address the literacy issue', 'relationship building between GRT and other BME communities'. We will consider these and other suggested subject areas in our future events.

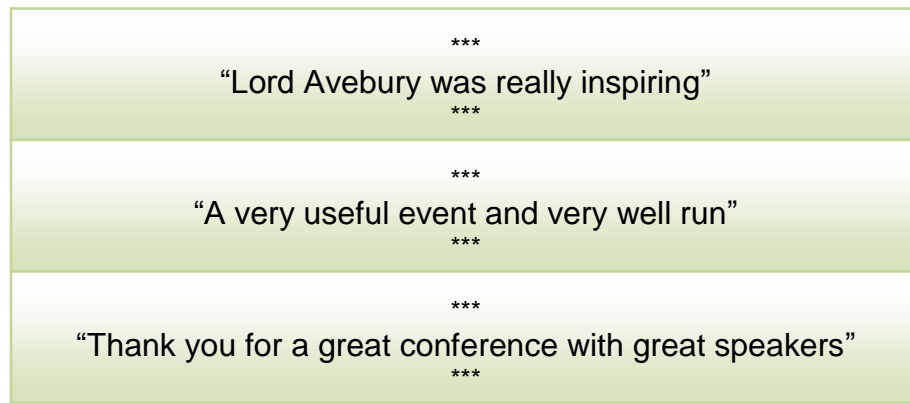
We will continue to improve a certain aspect of the organization of the event promotion and organisation of the event.

We took on board feedback of our users and changed the structure of our conference to allow more time for discussions at workshops. Participants were able to select one out of five workshops, which were running simultaneously. As a result, there have been more positive comments and feedback by participants.



The Traveller Movement would like to thank all participants for their contribution in making yet another excellent event.

Please ensure you book us into your diary for attending the 2015 conference on November 26th 2015.



The Traveller Movement

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