

Article by [Keith Cooper](#) and [Anita Pati](#) in [The Guardian](#), 25/ 10/12

# Pioneering Traveller community stands proud against cuts

A model of how to strengthen Travellers' relationships with the council, police and GPs is under threat



**Martin Ward, member of Stable Way tenants' and residents' association – Travellers' dogs are now regularly checked and tagged, thanks to their work.** Photograph: Paul Wenham-Clarke

The land around Stable Way, west London, has proved a popular stopping place for Gypsies and Travellers for centuries. And since the 1970s, the area, encircled by three A-roads and a train track, has been the permanent home for 20 or so Irish Traveller families. Caravans are lined up on this official site in two neat parallel rows, wedged among the concrete pillars that shoulder the hulk of the elevated Westway.

Amid the roar of the traffic, the community of Travellers has set up a fully constituted Tenants' and Residents' Association (TRA) – one of just a dozen operating across 320 council-run Gypsy and Traveller sites in England and Wales.

Since its creation two years ago, Stable Way TRA has had remarkable success strengthening the community's relationships with the police, health services and Kensington and Chelsea council, as well as helping to improve residents' education and cutting crime.

Police call-outs have dropped by almost half, from 80 in 2007-08 to 47 in 2011-12, and primary school attendance has reached 100%. All families are now registered with GPs and dentists. When a measles outbreak hit

the wider Traveller community last year only two children were affected on Stable Way, thanks to the success of an immunisation programme arranged through the TRA.

## Cuts to funding

But the TRA's pioneering work is now threatened by cuts to funding for community and voluntary sector groups and a proposed [housing](#) development adjacent to the Travellers' homes. The association's efforts to improve its residents' lives had been aided by having a constitution, which has allowed it increased access to charitable funds.

"Travellers don't want to be seen as if we were asking people for money," says TRA chair Patrick O'Donnell. "A lot of people at first were thinking we would be seen as if we were begging until it was explained that the money is there for residents' associations to apply for."

So far it has helped secure £25,000 to help families hook up to the internet in a project that combines digital literacy lessons with cookery. Residents were taught how to email, search for recipes online, and take and send pictures of what they had prepared.

A further £2,400 has put young residents through driving theory tests. Phil Regan, a research and development officer for Westway Development Trust, which helped get the TRA off the ground, says: "One of the first points of contact between the criminal justice system and young male travellers has been persistent driving without a licence. The underlying reason is about different levels of literacy, some of them not being able to read or write enough to do the theory test." Five out of the 12 involved have passed the test so far.

Regular police attendance at TRA meetings has also improved relationships between police and residents. Travellers' dogs are now regularly checked and tagged, and police officers make greater efforts to act on residents' complaints. "People sometimes throw abuse and objects like bottles down from the Westway," says Regan. "At the last meeting, three officers from the transport police came along and said they really wanted to help. Now all incidents are fully recorded by the site manager and passed on to the police so they can follow them up."

Stable Way is seen within the Conservative-controlled Kensington and Chelsea council as a key part of its effort to build the prime minister's "big society". "We want to build a borough in which individuals can find support, purpose and solidarity from a range of voluntary bodies, be they TRAs, clubs or some other form of association," says a council spokesman. "We see supporting the development of TRAs as part of that."

Stable Way is also held up as an example of how to empower Gypsy and Traveller [communities](#) in new research by the [Third Sector Research Centre \(TSRC\)](#). The UK's 300,000 Gypsies and Travellers are among the most socially excluded and politically disempowered groups in British society, concludes the TSRC report, *Hearing the Voice of Gypsies and Travellers*. "This lack of political power is evidenced by the small number of TRAs that exist," says the report. It adds that TRAs such as Stable Way can "play an important role in improving access to services. They can represent the needs of tenants and make them aware of support and services".

The Irish Traveller Movement strongly supports the creation of residents' associations on Traveller sites. "What's happening on Stable Way is very important," says Yvonne MacNamara, its chief executive. "Traveller tenants' associations or residents' groups need to become legally constituted. This gives the Travellers involved a voice and more power. If a residents' group is legally constituted, then, by law, a local authority has to engage with them."

But MacNamara fears Traveller TRAs will suffer from council funding cuts. "If the TRAs and other stakeholders want something but the local authority can't afford it, then it's very unlikely to happen. That's the problem with the coalition government's big society idea, in a nutshell."

Report author Andrew Ryder, who acts as an adviser to the all-party parliamentary group for Traveller law reform, wants to see the few Traveller TRA success stories replicated across the UK, but he warns this could prove to be a huge challenge. "What is lacking is the financial support," he says. The big society rhetoric has not really helped those at the margins who need intensive support to get going, he explains. "We are talking about people who have been very disempowered."

Stable Way's achievements are also under threat from a regeneration scheme with a footprint of five rugby fields, which could be built on derelict land in a neighbouring borough right next to the Westway site. The plan for the sprawling former Dairy Crest site includes 11 buildings of up to 32 storeys, shops, restaurants and bars, and 1,150 homes.

The Travellers are frustrated that such a major development could go ahead while their repeated pleas for better accommodation have been ignored. No extra provision has been made in either borough since the site was officially recognised.

Martin Ward, a member of the TRA who has lived on Stable Way since 1972, says: "This site is for all of west London and we have got overcrowding here. In 40 years they could have bought another site."

The Travellers were sent a letter inviting them to consult about the planning proposals and they will be making their views known through the TRA, but O'Donnell believes its powers to influence decision-making are pretty slim. "The reason we set up the residents' association was to have a bigger say in the running of the site, but the council still seems to have the final word," he says. "If you look out there you can see daylight, but if they build those high rises it is going to be like we are indoors all the time."

Kensington and Chelsea council says it recognises the Westway site is far from ideal, but the borough is one of the most densely developed and expensive places in the world. "It is formidably difficult to find affordable land for any purpose," says a spokesman. He adds that the council has applied to the Greater London authority and the Big Lottery fund to help pay for improvements to the site, including an extra pitch to accommodate a family.

- **A photographic exhibition, *The Westway***: a portrait of a community by Paul Wenham-Clarke, will be shown at St Martin-in-the-Fields Crypt Gallery, London, from 7 January 2013