

Roads, Bridges and Tunnels – a reflection on learning from an Asset Based Community Development Project with marginalised communities



ABCD (Asset Based Community Development) at Leeds GATE

Leeds GATE are a community members organisation working with Gypsies and Travellers in Leeds. We work to improve the quality of life for Gypsies and Travellers. We are a community development organisation whose core value is that Leeds GATE belongs to Gypsies and Travellers.

Over the past two years we have been running an Asset Based Community Development Project which has involved a number of activities to learn, map, share and do. We have been exploring and describing what Gypsies and Travellers consider to be their key community assets and we have been looking at how Gypsy Traveller communities relate to other communities and services.

Theories of bonded social capital and bridging social capital underpin these conversations. We believe Gypsy and Traveller communities are strongly bonded, self-reliant and offer great levels of care to family and friends. Some of the things that Asset Based Community Development projects in other places have focused on - such as encouraging mutual support in neighbourhoods - we believe are already happening within Gypsy Traveller communities. Therefore, taking an asset based approach, we do not need to intervene to strengthen these aspects of Gypsy Traveller life which are functioning well. Our project is instead focusing on the bridging social capital of communities, which through our mapping exercises, has been shown to be weak.

This seems to be different to other Asset Based Community Development projects but perhaps this is because our jumping off point is different – we are not working with a neighbourhood as our starting point but a community bonded by identity rather than geography.

So we find ourselves looking at the bridging social capital – asking the question, are the strong bonds and self-reliance we describe in part a result of these communities marginalization and as such weak bridging capital? What can we do to explore and strengthen the links that Gypsy Traveller communities have to other communities, to services, to public assets? Are there elements of strongly bonded social capital that can be damaging to individuals within a community, if your individual identity falls outside of a social norm within that community?

We ultimately find ourselves asking the question – what makes a healthy community? And our learning so far suggests one that has both strongly bonded social capital and strong bridging social capital.

Asset Mapping

In exploring how we answer these questions we have found Asset Mapping to be a vital tool in capturing people's experiences. As we work with members who often have low literacy it is also a way of capturing conversations which is inclusive of all literacy levels.

Our project has produced two Asset Maps so far, one for Gypsy and Traveller community in Leeds and one which focuses on health. Through this process we have developed some key concepts to support our mapping of the relationships which Gypsy Traveller people have to other communities or services. These concepts are described here in short and in full below:

Roads - something that gets you to the place you want to go, this should be a direct route and free from obstruction. For example, for many of us there is a road to GP registration with a practice local to us that is simple, well signposted and often a short distance.

Bridges - where there is an obstruction in the road sometimes a bridge is necessary to get over this, a bridge is visible to all and provides a route to access – the question for communities is do you want our own bridge or do we want the road to be widened to include us too?

Tunnels – tunnels are another way of getting round an obstruction and tunnels are normally navigated by an individual finding a way round a problem- a do it yourself approach. Tunnels can seem like a good solution and can be effective at getting you to the place you need to go, all be it they are also hard work to dig. But a tunnel doesn't openly acknowledge a problem, it keeps it in the dark. Using a tunnel might also mean a less equitable service, however, in the absence of another way round the obstruction, is a tunnel the best solution

Navigating Roads, Bridges and Tunnels...

We have found that there are roads out that Gypsy Traveller people use all the time, these roads get people to the place they want to be and they are free of obstruction. We identified some roads that Gypsy Traveller people have; roads to church, roads to social life, roads to other communities where friends and allies exist.

We found that in certain situations the roads were closed meaning people can't get to their destination, for example the road to school. There are two ways to get around these obstructions, one of these ways is through building a bridge. The bridge builds a route to access which is open, visible to all and able to be accessed by the community/ies it targets. The bridge involves investment, working together and finding a solution to an obstruction. Bridges work best when they're built from both sides – we like to think of this as the founding stones for co-production.

However, a bridge isn't necessarily system change as the existence of a bridge doesn't oblige a change within a mainstream system or service, rather it makes a bolt on to get around the problem. The bridge can even make it easier for the mainstream service to stay the same, obliging anyone from that community to take the bridge rather than the road and in doing so making the inclusion of that community the responsibility of only those bridge builders as oppose to everyone in the system – the road builders. (We can look at Travellers' Education Services as a necessary bridge but one that hasn't enabled system change- the system change might look like schools demonstrating inclusive practice toward their Gypsy Traveller pupils.) However, key to bridges is that they are visible – they are in public, they acknowledge an obstruction (a problem) and they aim to find a visible solution.

The other way round an obstruction is a tunnel. A tunnel is often a route navigated by individuals, groups of individuals or an individual worker within a services to find a way round a problem. The tunnel is self-navigated in response to a system that doesn't work and it is navigated through forging relationships between people who are both invested in getting to that place. Be it the cousin that lets you use their address for your post enabling you to register at the GP or the health visitor that goes out of her way to visit the roadside camp – it is a pragmatic response to a problem. But the tunnel isn't visible to everyone and can have its disadvantages – it can mean an arduous journey that doesn't always meet people's needs. Gypsy Traveller people have been making tunnels for generations to find solutions to barriers

they face. Using your sister's address to register at the doctor as your roadside, it's great but you don't receive your letters calling you in for screening. Finding places to stop where you are invisible or know a friendly face, you might get two weeks on there but is it the best place for you and your family to be stopping?

And we find workers committed to good practice that dig their tunnels daily, in the face of the system they work within being an obstruction to Gypsy Traveller people's access they find a way round. The education support worker that knows an official address is a care of address and will make sure a family is actually being referred to schools and services near to where they are currently living. The enforcement officer who turns a blind eye to a camp for a week as they know it's in everyone's best interests.

The bigger problem with Tunnels...

There's a problem with tunnels. The tunnel means the obstruction remains invisible to most people. This invisibility has an obvious effect that it doesn't seek to address the obstruction directly, to call it out and find a solution. This often means worse outcomes for the individuals involved in that situation and if we look at Gypsy Traveller communities education and health outcomes, we can see this at play.

But tunneling can have a more pernicious effect – if an obstruction is only visible to those directly involved in a situation and invisible to wider communities, those wider communities will find their explanations for Gypsy Traveller people not making their way smoothly down the same roads they themselves do. Or they might find the entrance to a tunnel and attribute their own reasoning as to why a tunnel is needed. Here we begin to see the production of stereotypes and assumptions which quite often use the attribution of race or culture in their explanations, and act to inform racist opinions.

Why don't Traveller kids go to school? Coz their parents don't believe in education.

Why do people stop on the roadsides? Coz they have no regard for other communities and they don't want to pay council tax.

In the void of information not only about Gypsy Traveller culture but also about the legal and policy frameworks surrounding Gypsy Traveller communities (that often play cat and mouse with these communities) people find their own logic and explanations for the things they can see. This also reflects the way in which society over-archingly responds to racism too, racism is curtailed to the realm of interpersonal relationships whilst the way in which structural racism impacts on those interactions is ignored and hidden.

Often the obstructions to our roads are so immovable because they involve a collusion of silence and tunneling right from the bottom to the top. It's quite amazing that they remain invisible to wider communities but they do, all that's seen is the impact of these policies. To take an obvious point, those roadside families– they are likely homeless because it's notoriously

hard for Travellers or local authorities to gain planning permission for Traveller sites – that’s the obstacle. And if they were on a site, they would be paying council tax.

We have reflected that building the foundations to the bridge, which overcomes the obstruction can undermine the tunnel and cause it to collapse. So shining a light on a problem and a situation can mean that the solutions people have navigated themselves are destroyed when we try and work within a system to bridge build. This can be a scary place to be as it might mean a period of less access to a service, or access in a new and different way.

A big challenge for us as an advocacy organisation has been to challenge disproportionately high rents by local authorities on Gypsy Traveller sites. This situation has arisen through a number of tunnels, mined one on top of each other to find routes through, you collapse one, you collapse them all - a house of cards.

So rents can be so high because the Mobile Homes Act obliges local authorities to place site rents outside of their social housing structures, meaning all of the policies regarding involvement and accountability that they are legally required to have to manage social housing don’t apply to Traveller sites. From the very top we’re creating a tunnel.

Local authorities can then, feasibly, charge whatever they want. Our members want to challenge this, as would only seem fair. But here’s the crux – a lot of that rent is paid through housing benefits and since benefit cuts some of that is topped up by discretionary housing payments. It’s a poverty trap, obliging dependence.

But when you can’t see the obstruction and you only see the tunnel – we can see the headline of The Sun– *Whole Gypsy site reliant on state benefits* – and what explanations will fill the void to answer why that situation occurs – *Travellers and Gypsies are lazy etc* - those well-rehearsed stereotypes (keeping it personal and letting the structural problems off the hook, again).

Addressing the Obstruction

We recognise that tunnels are absolutely necessary for survival and sometimes they are the pioneers for good solutions to problems. We also, absolutely, see the need for bridges to overcome barriers and level up equality. But do we want our own bridge or do we want the road to be widened to include us too? And what does having our own bridge do for the way the people on the road perceive us?

Neither bridges or tunnels address the obstruction head on. The more we think about what the obstruction is, we think in a lot of cases, it is our inability to accept difference. Our systems are built around a majority cultural experience. They don’t suit everyone but they do pander to an idea of what it means to be a British citizen. A lot of these obstructions we come across when working with Travellers’ seem to be a consequence of not thinking through difference, of always thinking through a majority lens. A situation whereby accepting the need to treat people

as individuals, with different needs and work with them flexibility doesn't fit into how systems are inherently planned.

Here at GATE we have this idea about inclusion health - that if you commission for Gypsy Traveller people or asylum seekers or sex workers -you commission from the margins. In commissioning from the margins you think through lots of barriers to access and you overcome them. But these are the same barriers faced by everyone – the rude receptionist when you're having a bad mental health day, the overcomplicated leaflet in language only a health professional would understand. So in being able to see the obstructions created by systems through this lens of difference this allows us to think creatively and flexibly and improve everyone's experiences. It allows us to repave that road, so everyone can walk down it.

Overarchingly the question we ask ourselves is what is our role at GATE? Should we help people build bridges wherever possible, to make sure the system is responding in some way to the needs of our members? Should we demand roads – even though this will take a long time and be a bigger task? Or should we take what could be seen as an asset based approach in helping our members sure up the tunnels they've been digging for years in the absence of a better solution?

In thinking though our options – we need bridges and we need tunnels and we want to see roads being paved for the future. One of the things that needs to happen to build that road is to remove the obstruction, a key part of doing that is to acknowledge its presence and then to have an honest conversation about it. What is it? What created it? Why is it there? How do our actions break it down? How do our actions re-inforce it? This kind of honest dialogue, allows us to have constructive discourse that focuses on finding sustainable solutions that involve us all, it's asset based problem solving and it builds trust.



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