Foreword by Lord Avebury

This book appears at a crucial moment. At the time of writing, the progress and modest gains made for Gypsies and Travellers, most notably in the form of increased site provision and levels of social inclusion, appear to be in jeopardy. As this book visibly demonstrates, Gypsies and Travellers remain one of the most excluded minority groups in society, yet it is feared that this situation could be aggravated through cuts in local and national funding, which are seeing the loss and erosion of valuable targeted services for Gypsies and Travellers, most notably in the shrinkage of the national network of Traveller Education Services. One of the most emotive issues has been erosion and fragmentation of the hopes built up for the delivery of a sufficient number of new sites to address the acute national shortage as had been promised through regional targets and planning strategies and the Planning Circular 01/06. Sadly, these were repealed by the Localism Act 2011.

The lessons of history on this subject appear to have been discarded. Adequate site provision, both permanent and transit, is the answer to the problem of unauthorised encampments. The Caravan Sites Act 1968, which I sponsored as an MP, required local authorities to provide sites for Gypsies and Travellers residing in or resorting to their areas. Unfortunately, the duty was repealed in 1994, and although by that time 350 or so local authority Gypsy and Traveller sites had been constructed in England and Wales, there still remained a significant shortfall in site provision. Many local authorities had ignored their statutory duty and the ministerial power of direction in section 9(2) of the Act had only been used towards the end of the legislation’s life. The few directions that were issued did have some effect in galvanising backward local authorities. The shortfall remains, caused by the failure of successive governments and local authorities to ensure adequate provision. This has led to the endemic situation of unauthorised encampments and unauthorised developments, and it is essential that a policy of ensuring adequate site provision is promoted if any positive steps are to be made in tackling that problem.

Experience over nearly 50 years leads me to conclude that provision of Gypsy and Traveller sites, or the allocation of land for sites in local authority plans, is the key to reducing community tensions and enforcement costs as well as improving the life chances of a highly marginalised minority. Conversely, failure to provide sites or to allocate land for them, inevitably leads to the proliferation of unauthorised sites, with disastrous effects on the life chances of Gypsies and Travellers and
disputes between them and settled communities. To achieve the goal of eliminating unauthorised encampments, financial support needs to be combined with obligations on local authorities to provide sites based on accurate and fair assessments of need with the prospect of government intervention where councils fail to act. However, the answer does not just lie in adequate provision of decent sites; a policy framework is also required that takes note of and reflects the aspirations of this minority and empowers them to help themselves. Too often in the past, policy makers have sought to assimilate and eradicate the identity and unique lifestyle of Gypsies and Travellers.

The lack of logic and humanity on this issue by the powers that be has been demonstrated to me on numerous occasions over the years. One notable example was the case of the Traveller site at Dale Farm in Essex. In England as a whole, 20% of Gypsies and Travellers do not have an authorised place to live, while in the county of Essex, of which Dale Farm is a part, the proportion is 47.4%. Despite this, Basildon Council, the authority within which the site lies, was intent on a forced eviction, even though the site prior to its occupation was a scrap yard. The Leader of the Council, Tony Ball, said that following an eviction ‘the encampment might well become allotments’, and when asked where the residents are to go after they are evicted, he replied ‘they came from somewhere. One has to draw the line at some point. All our authorised sites are full up’ (The Economist, 2010). Attempts to avert forced eviction by relocating those threatened with eviction to land proposed by the Homes and Communities Agency were spurned by Basildon Council and the eviction was carried out in October 2011, supported by riot police who used tasers on protestors (The Guardian, 19 October 2011).

Sadly, the short-sightedness and lack of compromise displayed in the case of Basildon Council are not isolated. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2010), in its fourth periodic report on the United Kingdom, expressed concern about the eviction of Gypsies and Travellers. The report found that: ‘An excessive emphasis on enforcement (i.e. eviction), involving often protracted and expensive litigation, instead of seeking forward-looking solutions in consultation with all members of the local community, has also been shown to damage race relations’ (2010, para 153).

A continued emphasis on evictions and enforcement comes at a time when other major European countries are planning mass expulsions of Roma or demolitions of Roma settlements. Rights groups warn that these measures entail the criminalisation of an entire ethnic group, and break European Union law. Unfortunately, European states have
forgotten that the criminalisation of Jews and Gypsies was the precursor to their dehumanisation and genocide by the Nazis, but this time the tide of racism may not stop at the white cliffs of Dover.

Despite these huge setbacks and challenges, I am not disheartened. This book chronicles many positive developments initiated by Gypsies and Travellers and those who are sympathetic to their cause. This gives me a sense of optimism for I know that there are great reserves of courage and resilience among Gypsies and Travellers. This determination has been displayed by many of the community campaigners who I have been privileged to work with. Let us hope that campaigners achieve their simple aspiration that Gypsies and Travellers are treated with fairness and dignity. A simple aspiration, but one that if achieved could have profound implications for the type of society we all live in.

Lord Avebury