Message from Lalage Grundy – May 2021

Joint Chair Surrey Gypsy and Traveller Communities Forum

It’s been a long time since we all met, so here is a short history of the last couple of years. We had a series of major changes. We’d already lost the support of a paid worker from Surrey County Council. Hilda Brazil, one of the founder members of the Forum, stood down as chair after many hard working years. Ann Wilson, also a founder, tragically died just over two years ago. We continued to respond to needs and requests, but we stopped new initiatives of our own. After a pause, we looked for new people to become involved with the work of the Forum, and activity resumed, responding to requests, going to conferences and preparing for an AGM in spring 2020. We continued delivering the cultural awareness training. We attended the high court on one occasion concerning a local council’s injunction preventing Unauthorised Encampments. Over this period we worked with various councils and councillors who were writing their Local Plans, many of which were looking at including more sites and pitches in their plans. We had Romany weekend at Rural Life Centre in Tilford. The other main area was health, and we worked with Lisa Gavin about the nurses who now visit sites. She will be speaking about this at the AGM.

Of course, Covid 19 and the first lockdown stopped us for a while. Last summer, a small group of us met regularly on Zoom and made use of the time to update the training programme and to adapt it for delivery online. Last autumn, we delivered training to over 40 staff and councillors from Surrey Heath. The website was updated; many thanks to John Hockley for all that he has done. We are getting enquiries from people using the enquiries@sgtcf.uk.

Fighting hate crime, particularly online, is another issue which we have been involved in. We responded to the government consultation about criminalising trespass and supported the petition on the subject which was recently debated in parliament. Encouragingly, there were MPs who were supportive of the situation of Gypsies and Travellers. At present we are working with Time to Change Surrey who are developing a short piece of drama about mental health.

At the invitation of SMEF, Surrey Multi Ethnic Forum, in February, we spoke at some length on line with Lady Louise O’Connor, Deputy Lord Lieutenant, about community issues and problems. At her instigation we subsequently spoke to researchers at Royal Holloway, University of London, about Gypsy and Traveller children attending school.

I would like to thank the group who have continued to work hard keeping Forum activities going. We look forward to a new committee who will be able to get involved in the work we have been doing and hopefully develop into new areas.