

# Gypsies, travellers, and the impact of the coronavirus

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## Purpose

The purpose of this briefing is to highlight some of the key issues facing the Gypsy and Traveller communities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It covers Gypsy and Traveller households living in houses and bungalows as well as those living in authorised sites, the majority of which are now privately owned, and those living in unauthorised sites. It recognises that many social housing landlords may have limited roles in providing direct support to those members of the Gypsy and Traveller communities who they do not house but it is nevertheless important for all social landlords to be aware of potential issues which might impact on demand for their services.

Much of the information in this briefing focuses on the Gypsy and Traveller communities and does not specifically cover the Roma community. This is partly because there is less research on this community and Roma was not a category in the last Census. In general terms, many of the issues described below will also apply to Roma people, who may encounter added difficulties around their immigration status, language, racism and access to support services.

## The top ten points for social landlords to remember

- 1 If you manage a Gypsy or Traveller site, ensure that there is clear information provided on the current regulations
- 2 If you manage a Gypsy or Traveller site, ensure the facilities make it possible for residents to follow the guidance on hand washing and social distancing
- 3 Check your profiling data to see where your settled Gypsy and Traveller families are to see if they need extra support with accessing Universal Credit for example
- 4 Check whether any households of Gypsy and Traveller families are incurring rent arrears because of loss of casual or seasonal employment
- 5 For both settled households and those living in sites, consider working with partners including voluntary groups and those working with Gypsy and Traveller communities to provide materials and toys to help occupy children
- 6 For both settled households and those living in sites, consider working with partners including the police and voluntary groups and those working with Gypsy and Traveller communities to ensure anyone experiencing domestic abuse knows how to access support and is reassured that support will be forthcoming
- 7 For both settled households and those living in sites, consider working with health agencies and those working with Gypsy and Traveller communities including local GPs and pharmacies to ensure that Gypsy, Traveller and Roma people have access to health advice and care
- 8 Consider the possibility of providing accommodation for those who need to self-isolate and are unable to in the accommodation in which they are living. As landlords, you may need to monitor that extended family members do not now move into settled households' accommodation
- 9 Unless there are exceptional circumstances, defer any attempts to evict unauthorised camps from your land
- 10 Ensure that housing advice services are prepared to deal with any enquiries from Gypsy, Traveller or Roma households who may have been evicted from sites.

## Introduction

The 2011 Census revealed that 58,000 respondents identified as being of Gypsy or Irish Traveller heritage in England and Wales. Most of these respondents (61 percent) lived in whole houses or bungalows while 24 percent lived in a caravan or other mobile structure. Gypsy or Irish Travellers were more than twice as likely to live in social housing than the overall population of England and Wales (41 percent compared to 16 percent) and less likely to own their accommodation outright (21 percent compared to 26 percent). (1)

More recently, in March 2020, 30 organisations which represent and support Travellers and Gypsies wrote to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. Their letter included an estimate of 3,000 for the number of Gypsy and Traveller households living roadside. A further 20,000 households live on sites. (2)

The intention of this letter was:

*'to raise our concern about the lack of government information, advice or action to support Gypsy, Traveller or Boater communities during the coronavirus pandemic.'* (3)

They were particularly concerned at the lack of guidance because:

*Gypsy and Traveller communities are known to face some of the most severe health inequalities and poor life outcomes amongst the UK population, with higher rates of long-term illness, health problems or disabilities, higher overall prevalence of reported chest pain and higher levels of respiratory problems. (4) This means that within Gypsy and Traveller communities, there is a disproportionately high representation of people at increased risk of severe illness from coronavirus.*

Their letter also quoted from the 2019 report by the House of Commons Women and Equalities Select Committee, 'Tackling Inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities.' (5) The Committee noted that:

*'..while many inequalities have existed for a long time, there has been a persistent failure by both national and local policy-makers to tackle them in any sustained way. This failure has led to services that are ill-equipped to support Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people to use services that they need and are entitled to.'*

The Committee concluded that:

*'..trust is low between Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and public services, due to historic and ongoing discrimination. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people feel that they are, at best, ignored and, at worst, actively discriminated against in public services and policy making.*

*'This creates unnecessary tensions and prejudiced attitudes. This also lets down vulnerable members of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, especially those suffering domestic abuse and children who are not receiving their legal right to education.'*

The Committee's conclusions make it even more important that these communities have clear advice and support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Key issues facing Travellers and Gypsies

### Information

As noted above, one of the key issues facing Travellers and Gypsies in relation to COVID-19 is access to reliable sources of information.

Several organisations which are run by or provide support to Travellers and Gypsies include COVID-19 sections on their websites. Most have put together factsheets. These cover topics such as social distancing, domestic abuse, eviction and access to financial support. Leeds Gate has a one page factsheet on social distancing with seven simple bullet points such as:

- Avoid non-essential use of public transport
- Avoid gatherings with friends and families. Keep in touch by phone, internet or social media. (6)

Some organisations have produced short videos relating to COVID-19. The Travellers Times website is one example. These cover topics such as school closures, the lockdown and how to identify symptoms of the virus. (7)

Police forces have enlisted help from community members to help them ensure the regulations are being observed. In the Fir Vale district of Sheffield a member of the Roma Community has been on patrol with officers to explain the seriousness of the situation and the importance of following Government advice as this is an area with a significant Traveller and Gypsy population.

### Healthcare

The House of Commons report noted that:

- The health of Gypsies and Travellers is much poorer than that of the general population, even when controlling for other factors such as variable socio-economic status and/or ethnicity
- Life expectancy is ten to twelve years less than that of the non-traveller population
- 42 percent of English Gypsies are affected by a long term condition, as opposed to 18 percent of the general population
- One in five Gypsy Traveller mothers will experience the loss of a child, compared to one in a hundred in the non-traveller community.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) 2016 fact sheet, "Is Britain Fairer?" also highlighted the health issues of Gypsies and Travellers, which would put many into the "vulnerable" category in the Government's shielding strategy. The EHRC found that:

*'Compared with the general population, Gypsies and Travellers are more likely to suffer bad health. This includes lower life expectancy, high infant mortality rates, high maternal mortality rates, low child immunisation levels, higher prevalence of anxiety and depression, chronic cough or bronchitis (even after smoking is taken into account), asthma, chest pain and diabetes, and higher rates of smoking. This is exacerbated by the fact that many Gypsies and Travellers remain unregistered with GPs.'*

*There is emerging evidence that health inequalities of Roma people are similar to those identified among Gypsies and Travellers, including a high prevalence of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, premature myocardial infarction, obesity, asthma and mental health issues such as stress, compared with the general population, anxiety and depression.’ (8)*

Travellers and Gypsies who live on authorised sites may find that the facilities on these sites vary considerably. The House of Commons report concluded that:

*‘Poor conditions and sanitation on Traveller sites are contributing to the poor health of Gypsy and Traveller families, including many children.’*

These “poor conditions” mean that Travellers and Gypsies will find it difficult to comply with guidance on hand-washing which is a key piece of Government advice on how to prevent the spread of the virus.

Gaining access to health care is also difficult. The reasons for this have been variously attributed to discrimination, difficulties navigating the NHS, and a reluctance by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people to seek medical attention until their condition has become very serious. In the case of Roma people, language may present an additional barrier. The result is that Traveller and Gypsy families tend to use emergency services such as A&E rather than primary health care provision. Currently the whole population is being discouraged from going to A&E which means that one of the main routes of healthcare for Travellers and Gypsies is significantly reduced.

### **Social Distancing**

All the websites providing information for Travellers and Gypsies explain what “social distancing” means and why it is important. This not only includes the basic advice of keeping two metres apart and only going out once a day for exercise. It also covers large gatherings, funerals and other events that are particularly important to some Travellers and Gypsies.

Already, several important dates in the Traveller and Gypsy Calendar such as the Appleby Horse Fair, have been cancelled in line with other major public and sporting events. The press release, announcing the cancellation noted that:

*‘While we are extremely disappointed to have to make this announcement, it would be irresponsible for the Fair to go ahead at a time when everyone must do everything they can to avoid spreading the virus.’(9)*

The Traveller Movement has produced a factsheet on funerals. This notes that only immediate family members (spouse, children, parents, grandparents, grandchildren) should consider attending funerals, with everyone observing the ‘two metre’ social distancing rule, and than in practice, undertakers and funeral service providers will have their own rules aimed at safeguarding both mourners and their staff which may limit attendance to a small group of people. The Traveller Movement fact sheet explains that:

*‘Extended family members such as cousins, aunts, uncles and friends should not attend funerals in order to prevent COVID-19 from spreading.’*

The factsheet goes on to warn that:

*'If you don't follow government social distancing and isolation rules you can be issued a £60 penalty which will double with every incident up to £960.'* (10)

## **Stay at Home**

Several of the Traveller and Gypsy websites stress the need to stay at home and self-isolate if someone in a household shows symptoms of having COVID-19. They also give advice on where to get support. For example, the Friends, Families and Travellers website says that:

*'if you are living on a Traveller site, ask the site manager for advice. If you are living roadside, you should let your local authority know and ask for support in finding a place to stop with access to the right facilities.'* (11)

Where possible vulnerable people such as the elderly and those with existing health conditions should move out of the home. However, this is not always feasible especially if someone is living in a roadside camp. Even if someone is living on an authorised site it will be difficult. The House of Commons Select Committee found many sites have inadequate facilities, which was why the Committee recommended that:

*'Local authorities should inspect every existing private Traveller site in their area to map which have access to a minimum standard of basic amenities and which do not. For those that do not, local authorities should place conditions upon the license to ensure that these measures are put in place or consider revoking licences that do not comply with these conditions.'* (12)

The 2011 Census found that 39 percent of people identifying as Gypsy or Irish Traveller were under the age of 20 (compared to 24 percent of the overall England and Wales population). In addition, 45 percent of Gypsy or Irish Traveller households had dependent children, higher than the average for England and Wales which was 29 percent. Both these factors may make "staying at home" particularly challenging for Gypsy and Traveller households.

## **Evictions**

Evictions are always a major issue for Travellers and Gypsies. They are even more of a concern during the COVID-19 crisis. Some magistrates, for example in Gloucestershire, have made it clear they will not consider any applications to evict Travellers and Gypsies for at least the next three months. However, according to the Community Law Project evictions are still taking place in other areas. (13)

The Community Law Project has welcomed the initiative in Gloucestershire but has also written to the Lord Chancellor asking that the government issues guidance to all magistrates that no eviction hearings should be held for the time being. The letter argues that otherwise it will be difficult for Travellers and Gypsies to follow advice to 'stay at home'. (14)

The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) issued a letter to all chief officers in late March, urging them to use discretion when dealing with an unauthorised Traveller and Gypsy encampment. The letter notes that:

*'Health outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are historically very poor compared to almost all other ethnic groups. The reality of roadside living without reliable*

*access to water and sanitation makes the universal current medical advice of frequent hand-washing more challenging.’ (15)*

The letter commends the advice from Friends, Families and Travellers on managing encampments (16). The NPCC letter also encourages forces to consider using the concept of ‘negotiated stopping’. This involves:

*‘local authorities and other landowners making an agreement with Gypsies and Travellers on matters such as facilities and waste disposal, whilst allowing unauthorised encampments on land that is not contentious.’*

While the letter was welcomed, some campaigners would have liked the NPCC to have gone further and suggest to landowners that they avoid evicting traveller camps in the current situation. (17)

### ***Violence Against Women and Girls***

There have been widespread concerns about the rise in incidents facing women and girls since the ‘stay at home’ policy was adopted. Sandra Horley CBE, Chief Executive of National Domestic Abuse Charity Refuge said:

*‘1.6 million women experienced domestic abuse last year, and self-isolation has the potential to aggravate pre-existing abusive behaviours by perpetrators.’*

*‘While in lockdown or self-isolation, women and children are likely to be spending concentrated periods of time with perpetrators, potentially escalating the threat of domestic abuse and further restricting their freedom.’ (18)*

The National Domestic Abuse hotline reported that there has already been a 25 percent increase in calls to its services since the lockdown began. (19)

The House of Commons report highlighted violence against women and young girls as particularly significant issues in Traveller and Gypsy communities for a number of reasons including, outdated attitudes, tight knit family structures and the difficulty of starting a new life. (20) The report also highlighted the particular difficulties faced by Roma women who were experiencing abuse:

*‘This (support) is especially lacking under current welfare rights of EEA nationals and the case of single mothers without a UK work history. While experiencing the need to escape abusive partners or faced with homelessness after the breakdown of a relationship, Roma women have been threatened with having to either accept coach or plane tickets back to their country of origin or being made street homeless (with the subsequent threat of having their children removed from their care).’ (21)*

It is likely, therefore, that the ‘stay at home’ policy will exacerbate an already difficult situation. This has been recognised by some of the traveller organisations. The Traveller Movement’s COVID-19 website includes a factsheet on domestic abuse giving advice on where to get help and the forms that help might take. (22)



## **Employment and Benefits**

The House of Commons report found that Travellers and Gypsies have the lowest rate of economic activity of any ethnic group (47 percent active compared to an overall average of 63 percent). The most common reason for this low rate was:

*'looking after the home or family at 27 percent. This is higher than for all usual residents aged 16 and over in England and Wales at 11 percent. The second largest was long term sick or disabled at 26 percent – the highest proportion across all ethnic groups'. (23)*

A significant number of Travellers and Gypsies who are economically active are self-employed. A number of the Traveller and Gypsy websites include information on the government's scheme to support self-employed people who have lost their income as a result of COVID-19 noting that it is unlikely that any payments under the scheme will be made until June at the earliest. (24)

With so many Traveller and Gypsy households likely to face financial hardship, advice is available on how to claim Universal Credit (25). The advice outlines what Universal Credit is, who can apply, what it might pay for and how to assess eligibility.

## **Hate crime**

Hate crime and other forms of harassment and discrimination against Gypsies and Travellers has been a persistent concern. A survey carried out by Traveller Movement, a national Gypsy, Roma and Traveller charity, found that, in 2017, 91 percent of the 199 respondents had experienced discrimination and 77 percent had experienced hate speech or a hate crime. (24) Ethnicity classifications are not consistently included in police and Crown Prosecution Service statistics, so it is difficult to know whether these figures are reflected in reported hate crime numbers. (26)

The EHRC fact sheet "A Fairer Britain?" highlighted that the Spring 2014 Global Attitudes Survey indicated that 50 percent of people in Britain reported having an unfavourable view of Roma.

Currently there does not seem to be any evidence of an increase in hate crime directed at the Gypsy, Traveller or Roma communities. There has, however, been an increase in reported hate crime against people of Chinese or South Asian origin. (27)



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**Joanna Jeffery** and **Richard Seager** have been Associates of HQN for nearly 20 years and have played a leading part in our work to promote equality and diversity.

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