

The Traveller Movement

Resource for London

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Submission to Baroness Lawrence's review into the impact of Coronavirus on Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities

About the Traveller Movement

The Traveller Movement (TM) is a leading national charity committed to the fulfillment of Human Rights for ethnic minority Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) people. The Traveller Movement's mission is to develop a platform and voice for Travellers, working in solidarity with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities to achieve equality through self-determination and proactive participation in influencing and shaping policy.

Introduction

Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers experience the worst social and economic outcomes of all ethnic minority groups in the UK. Research published by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in 2009 presented evidence of Gypsies' and Travellers' experience of inequality in a wide range of areas and highlighted 'the extent to which many of their experiences remain invisible and ignored within wider agendas' (Cemlyn et al., 2009).

In 2019 the Women and Equalities committee found¹ that policymakers had comprehensively failed Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities and there has been a persistent failure to tackle these long standing inequalities in any sustained way. On the 6th June 2019 the communities Minister, Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth announced a national strategy to tackle these inequalities, however this consultation has yet to formally commence.

In November 2019 the Traveller Movement used its national conference as a platform to conduct a community consultation, the results of which can be found in this [report](#).

Given the lack of government initiative or engagement, it is unsurprising that GRT communities are deeply affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and require urgent assistance in the following areas:

Education

Many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils are left without educational support and resources during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the last few weeks, the Traveller Movement (TM) has been inundated with requests for support, including: requests for tuition; educational resources; access to tutors; access to laptops, data; advice about school exclusion. TM has set up a tutoring project in partnership with Kings College London's Widening Participation team where we link tutors with GRT pupils who want support. Find information here <https://travellermovement.org.uk/Covid-19>

TM and other organisations wrote to the Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, flagging a [range of educational issues](#) affecting Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils and suggested recommendations for change. These include digital exclusion, access to resources, and access to free school meal vouchers. Schools must be made aware that the predicted grading system will be biased against GRT, and other nomadic groups such as New Travellers, Circus families, Showmen, Boaters etc. and BME pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds. It is essential that guidance is established on how to overcome these biases so that historical injustices, such as cultural or unconscious bias, racism and low expectations in respect of GRT or BME pupils are not further entrenched in predicted grading.

Recommendations to government

- All children without a laptop should be given one. The current Department for Education (DfE) guidance allows some children, particularly GRT, to fall through the gaps.
- The DfE should work with schools and telecommunications technology providers to have broadband installed, and devices loaned or donated to all children without them.
- Where this isn't possible, schools should be posting out resource packs that include some basic guidance for parents. Where possible, teachers and schools should work with Traveller Education Support Services (TESS), and other Ethnic Minority & Traveller Achievement Services (EMTAS) to ensure GRT pupils are not forgotten.
- Ensure children on free school meals still have access to their meals and/or the new voucher scheme. This includes infant children with universal access but whom the voucher scheme excludes.
- There should be a robust process of scrutiny where the ranking and the grades calculated by centre assessment grades for each subject this year is significantly different to previous years for those who share a protected characteristic and / or on Free School Meals (FSM), in comparison to those who do not share that protected characteristic and not on FSM. Where there is a significant difference, we strongly believe that statistical standardisation should be applied to address any negative impact on those who share protected characteristics or are on FSM.
- Establish an inter-departmental government strategy to promote the social inclusion of GRT in education, health and social care.

Access to income support

Many Travellers are self-employed and unable to work at this time. We know many do not know the self-employment scheme will apply to them. It is also estimated that Travellers perform the highest amount of unpaid caring work of any ethnic group (ONS, 2014) but are often unaware of their rights and entitlements.

Recommendations to government

- Statutory Sick Pay should be extended to cover all who are ill or self-isolating because of coronavirus, regardless of earnings, and should be uprated equivalent to the National Living Wage for a full time employee.
- Universal Credit must be paid on the first day that a claim is made, or failing that any advance given to prevent hardship should be in the form of a grant, not a loan.
- Child benefit should be uprated by at least £10 a week to offset the additional costs of children being at home full time. The two-child limit and the benefit cap should be abolished.

Health and Mental Health

Health

Gypsies and Travellers experience some of the poorest health outcomes in the UK, including the lowest life expectancy of any group⁵. This makes these communities more vulnerable to Covid-19. Having high rates of respiratory problems, diabetes, disabilities, maternal mortalities, and low child immunisation levels means that many Gypsies and Travellers have a high risk of getting seriously ill or even dying from Covid-19.

The close-knit nature of Gypsy and Traveller families mean that Covid-19 can potentially spread fast within their communities, adding to their vulnerability in this crisis. Evidence suggests that men, BAME groups and disabled people may be more adversely affected by Coronavirus in terms of health impacts, but opportunities to collect and make use of consistent data are currently being missed. Without this it is impossible to measure the extent of the problem or take appropriate action to address it. Currently the NHS does not record GRT in its data dictionary, which means the health impact of Covid-19 will not be fully known.

Mental Health

In its December 2017 update the EHRC reported that: *'Gypsies, Travellers and Roma were found to suffer poorer mental health than the rest of the population in the UK and they were also more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression.'* It is highly likely that mental health problems within Gypsy and Traveller communities will intensify while self-isolating and socially distancing during Covid-19 lockdown and restrictions.

Some of the reasons negatively affecting Gypsies and Travellers mental health are: not being able to mourn their loved ones properly, and having to home school their children without access to digital resources and without appropriate skills (low literacy & numeracy levels). One Call Away⁶ (Traveller mental health and suicide assistance phone line) have had a small increase in people calling.

There is a great deal of anxiety in Traveller communities in relation to Covid-19 transmission, but also misinformation in relation to its elimination. We've heard worrying accounts of Travellers using bleach, Dettol and Zoflora excessively on their skin and in washing standard household items. There is a real risk of poisoning, especially among those with lower levels of literacy. A lot of older Travellers are very worried for their physical health, especially those site-based Travellers who cannot easily self-isolate. Approximately 25% of Gypsies and Travellers live on sites, while the remainder live in bricks and mortar accommodation⁷ (ONS, 2014; WEC, 2019).

Traveller funerals will be particularly difficult, as large funerals are the norm and a mark of respect for the deceased. TM created a fact sheet⁸ outlining rules of attendance at funerals under Covid-19. Many are struggling with the concept of cremation, as many Irish Travellers in particular prefer burial over cremation.

Recommendations to government

- More accessible information on Covid-19 is required on Traveller sites, as a lot of older Travellers are terrified
- Ensure information on viruses and vaccinations is disseminated. There is currently a wide number of anti-vaccination campaigns circulating in Gypsy and Traveller communities. Also myth busting is required in relation to viruses not coming from 5G towers
- Information on harmful impact of over-using Dettol, bleach and Zoflora on the skin
- Create specific guidance on access to funerals, and where attendance is not possible offer solutions for digital access
- More targeted online campaigns to boost morale, positive messaging, online events etc.
- Clearer guidance of when and how this lockdown will ease etc. living in uncertainty is the difficult for many people
- Work with the GRT community to develop a GRT mental health strategy which targets resources and funding at suicide prevention and support thus improving the healthcare experience for GRT populations.
- Update the NHS data dictionary to include Gypsies, Roma and Travellers.

Access to Information

Accessing information and keeping up to date on public health messages and other information about Covid-19 is difficult for those who have limited literacy skills and are digitally excluded. Some Gypsy and Traveller people rely solely on information they see on social media. Even when GRT organisations are doing their best to produce targeted and legitimate information, false news and information about Covid-19 can spread fast.

To date, we have seen little evidence of Traveller-specific awareness raising campaigns or materials being distributed by local authorities or central government. Some NGOs and charities have created specialist resources, but this isn't enough to reach the entire community. Given the paucity of information, Travellers are highly susceptible to hoax theories, false news and misinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic.

Traveller Movement created a dedicated Covid-19 web page, with facts sheets, videos and resources to address the gap in information. View the TM's Covid-19 web page here: <https://travellermovement.org.uk/Covid-19>

Recommendations to government

- Create and resource a dedicated phone line or website aimed at Gypsies, Roma and Travellers and groups with English as an additional language where they can get information about Covid-19 in regards to health, benefits, services, and funerals in easy to understand formats
- Work with Ofcom and social media platforms to tackle fake news, hoax theories and false information about vaccinations
- Digital exclusion is an ongoing issue for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. As part of the new national strategy to tackle GRT inequalities, the MHCLG should ensure there is a targeted strand in the strategy working across departments to overcome this issue.

Discrimination

In 2017 TM's online survey on the levels of discrimination experienced by 214 GRT community members across the UK found that 91% respondents had experienced discrimination because of their ethnicity, and 30% had experienced discrimination in relation to accessing health care. As noted by the AITHS (see below), the experience of discrimination or the perception of discrimination, *'is likely to lower a sense of efficacy and self-esteem and this is damaging to mental health and wellbeing'*.

Gypsies and Travellers continue to be the targets of excessive racialised media scrutiny during the Covid-19 pandemic. On the 31st March an article in The Sun entitled *Big Fat Gypsy Funerals* targeted and shamed a Traveller family for having too many family members at a family funeral. On 16th April Channel 4 Dispatches broadcasted a program titled *'The Truth about Traveller Crime'*. After this program aired, the levels of hate speech against Gypsy and Traveller people have sky rocketed. This has had a serious negative effect on people's mental well-being, adding to the stress and worry about Covid-19.

Recommendations to government

- Police should reach out and encourage GRT to report hate crime and discrimination
- Ofcom should investigate the Channel 4 Dispatches program *'The Truth about Traveller Crime'*

Accommodation and housing

Gypsies and Travellers who live on sites can be faced with overcrowding, having to share kitchens, bathrooms and toilets. Self-isolation and social distancing will be extremely hard in these conditions. If one person gets infected by Covid-19, it is highly likely that many other if not all people living on that site will get it too.

Gypsies and Travellers who are homeless, will face the constant threat of eviction, poor living conditions at the side of the road without access to clean water or electricity and are thus the most vulnerable community members.

Recommendations to government

- The MHCLG should work with local authorities to ensure all site managers know how to advise site residents to self-isolate and what measures social distancing measures, e.g. extra toilets & cleaning products provided
- The MHCLG should work with local authorities to ensure everyone living on an unauthorised encampment has access to basic water and sanitation
- The Home Office consultation to criminalise trespass and unauthorised encampments should be scrapped¹⁰

Domestic Abuse

The level of domestic abuse has increased within Gypsy and Traveller communities during Covid-19 lockdown. This is extremely dangerous for Gypsy and Traveller women who even in normal times are faced with numerous barriers in accessing help.

Domestic abuse services are not always aware of the specific dangers and cultural issues of Gypsy and Traveller women and therefore not able or willing to support them. The close-knit nature of their families and communities means that the women have to be extra careful when seeking help from family members as their loyalties might be with their husband. Furthermore, the historical discrimination experienced by these communities and therefore distrust towards social services and the police means that many women will not contact these authorities in fear of losing their children.

There is some anecdotal evidence (see Channel 4 Dispatches: *the Truth about Traveller Crime*) that the police and the ambulance service will not always respond to calls to some Traveller sites because they perceive them to be too dangerous to enter. The women on those sites are then left to their abusers' mercy. Some effort must be made to ensure Traveller women on sites experiencing domestic abuse are included in any new responses and they are not simply forgotten.

The government should support organisations who help GRT domestic abuse survivors and service providers. This includes funding organisations such as the Traveller Movement and Solace Women's Aid who already have designated services aimed at supporting Gypsy and Traveller women

Recommendations to government

- Specific resources and awareness raising campaigns targeting Gypsy and Traveller women are urgently required, made in cooperation with the organisations that support these women
- Work with Traveller support organisations to ensure awareness raising campaigns reach women on Traveller sites
- Police should contact Traveller Movement for online domestic abuse awareness training, to ensure engagement with abused women is non-discriminatory
- As per the home affairs select committee report², a comprehensive cross-governmental Covid-19 strategy on domestic abuse is urgently required, for lockdown and the period afterwards. This includes an increase refuge capacity and funding for specialist services.
- The plan should include access to information and support, outreach and prevention, funding for support services including specialist and BME services, housing support and refuge accommodation, and a strong criminal justice response. The national strategy should be backed up by local action plans produced by all local authorities as part of their emergency Covid-19 planning.

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in prison

GRT people generally experience poorer physical and mental health, compared to the general population. Their increased vulnerability to Coronavirus is not been identified in custodial settings, because they do not feel safe declaring their true ethnicity and/or the current systems do not provide the option for them to do so.

For many GRT people in prison, access to prison healthcare services is often the first, in a long time, they have relatively easy access to healthcare. This is because they find it difficult to register with a GP, if they cannot provide required documentation. A reduction in '*normal*' prison healthcare means relatively minor conditions are at risk of being left untreated and might therefore worsen.

GRT people in prison, rely heavily on peer support, often for cultural reasons. Although this is not exclusive to these ethnic groups, of particular concern are Irish Traveller men, who have higher prevalence of suicide and self-harm. Lack of vital peer support, due to extended periods of lockdown and social distancing, will have a major detrimental impact on their mental health and potentially further exacerbate incidents of suicide and self harm among this high-risk group.

People who self-harm or attempt suicide, during this time, are at critical risk. Staff have a duty of care towards them which means social distancing cannot be observed if administering life saving treatment. There might also be delays to getting outside help from ambulance services.

For some Roma people, who do not speak or read English well, and who are reliant on trusted friends to interpret and translate for them, will be further isolated and left at risk of being unable to access and/or understand important health information. This will also apply to people who have low literacy levels. However, the reality is, we will not be accurately measure and evaluate the impact of coronavirus on GRT people in prison, compared to other BAME groups, due to the lack of accurate ethnic monitoring data. Under these circumstances, where many lives are at risk, this is completely unacceptable.

Recommendations to government

- A steady increase in the prisons early release scheme
- Prisoners tested upon release
- Provision of PPE for all frontline prison staff
- Coronavirus testing more widely available for both prisoners and staff
- All prisoners should have access to hot water, hand washing/sanitising facilities
- Improve CJS data collection and ethnic monitoring categories to consistently and routinely include Roma people
- MoJ to continue to consider alternatives to custody, to reduce the prison population. This should involve the Police, Courts, Prisons and Probation
- Arrangements in place for early releases to be monitored by ethnicity, including GRT people
- Parliamentary discussions underway to review and reform sentencing, with a view to continually reducing the prison population, particularly for over represented groups.
- Discussions underway regarding how to effectively improve cultural awareness of GRT people among CJS practitioners.

For more information please visit our website or contact us on the details above.