

Digital Exclusion in Gypsy and Traveller communities in the United Kingdom

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Digital technology has been responsible for the biggest changes we have seen in the last century in health, social care, education, employment and further afield. However, whilst digital technology has been behind some of the biggest advances and changes society has made in recent years, it can also act to worsen the inequalities experienced by some groups. We interviewed 50 people from Gypsy and Traveller communities across the UK to find out the extent of digital inclusion and identify barriers for Gypsy and Traveller communities in digital participation.

Key Findings

- One in five Gypsy and Traveller participants had never used the internet, compared to one in ten members of the general population.
- Over half of Gypsy and Traveller participants said that they did not feel confident using digital technology by themselves.
- Only two in five Gypsies and Travellers surveyed said that they use the internet daily, compared to four out of five of the general population.
- Only 38% of Gypsies and Travellers (33% if housed) had a household internet connection, compared to 86% of the general population.

Recommendations

- NHS England should develop partnerships with the voluntary sector and industry to support digital inclusion for people with low literacy.
- Public health messages and digital health services should be designed to be accessible for people with low literacy.
- Policy makers should consider the digital exclusion faced by Gypsy and Traveller communities when carrying out Equality Impact Assessments.
- All government services which take a digital first approach should ensure that other options are available to populations experiencing digital exclusion.
- NHS England should negotiate with mobile phone providers so the NHS website can be accessed at little or no cost for people with no internet connection.

Introduction

“Digital participation is a critical social justice issue of the 21st century. Digital can be the driver for greater social and economic equality but just as surely it can be the barrier to such equality too.”

Douglas White, Carnegie UK¹

As health and social care services increasingly rely on and turn to digital solutions, it becomes increasingly important that we recognise the opportunities and threats presented to the diverse range of communities in the UK, especially those already experiencing inequalities. Gypsy and Traveller communities are recognised as experiencing some of the greatest inequalities across health, education, employment and in other areas too with evidence suggesting that:

- Only 30% of Irish Travellers live beyond 60².
- Only 10% of Gypsy/Roma children and 21% of Irish Traveller children achieve an A* to C in English and Maths GCSE³.
- Gypsies and Travellers are the ethnic groups least likely to be economically active (47%)⁴.

Until now, only anecdotal information has existed about digital exclusion in Gypsy and Traveller communities. Promising first steps have been made by NHS Digital who recently commissioned Good Things Foundation to carry out a pathfinder in Dorset on digital inclusion in maternity services which included a small group of young mothers from Piddlehinton Traveller site⁵. However, as health and social care services increasingly look towards digital solutions to achieve their aims, it is vitally important that a robust evidence base and nuanced understanding is developed on digital exclusion within Gypsy and Traveller communities.

Fortunately, there already exist key commitments in policy to ensure digital inclusion in health and social care. The Five Year Forward View held two key commitments to “Build the

¹ https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2016/09/v3-2697-CUKT-Digital-Participation-summary.pdf

² <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+//http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/346574/inclusion-health-evidencepack.pdf>

³ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/a-to-c-in-english-and-maths-gcse-attainment-for-children-aged-14-to-16-key-stage-4/latest>

⁴

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/datasets/2011censusanalysiswhatdoesthe2011censustellusaboutthecharacteristicsofgypsyorishtravellersinenglandandwales>

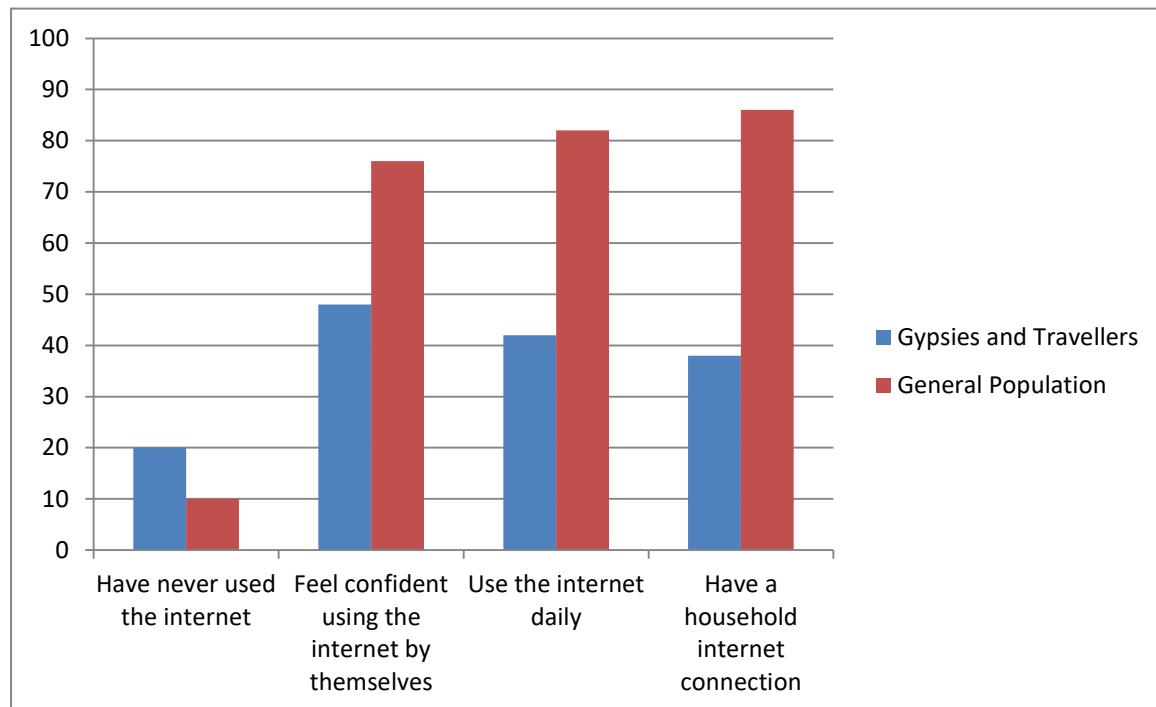
⁵ <https://digital-health-lab.org/dorset>

capacity of all citizens to access information” and to “Develop partnerships with the voluntary sector and industry to support digital inclusion”⁶, whilst Personalised Health and Care 2020 held two commitments to “Ensure that the digital inclusion opportunity is inclusive” and to “Build better insight into the barriers to digital inclusion”⁷.

We are concerned that because Gypsy and Traveller communities are already chronically excluded across a number of other indicators, then solutions put in place to reduce digital exclusion in the general population may not benefit Gypsy and Traveller communities and in some cases could even have a negative impact. It is important that health and social care services take into account the Marmot Review which recommended “To reduce the steepness of the social gradient in health, actions must be universal, but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage”⁸.

This research piece, carried out as part of our work on the VCSE Health and Wellbeing Alliance seeks to uncover the digital exclusion experienced by Gypsy and Traveller communities, to build better insight into the barriers to digital inclusion and to make recommendations on how these can be overcome.

Figure 1 – Digital exclusion in Gypsy and Traveller communities



⁶ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/5yfv-web.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/personalised-health-and-care-2020>

⁸ <http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report-pdf.pdf>

Internet use

Our research found that one in five Gypsies and Travellers have never used the internet, compared to one in ten members of the general population. We also found that only two in five Gypsies and Travellers use the internet daily, whilst four in five members of the general population use the internet daily.

Figure 2 – Internet use in Gypsy and Traveller communities

| | Have never used the internet | Use the internet daily |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|
| Gypsies and Travellers | 20% | 42% |
| General Population | 10% ⁹ | 82% ¹⁰ |

It is clear from these statistics that Gypsy and Traveller communities experience significant digital exclusion, furthermore, when we analysed the data further, we found that there were key characteristics shared by those who were digitally excluded. We found that those we interviewed who had never accessed the internet were all above the age of 40 and had low or no literacy. Over half of these indicated that their literacy level was the main barrier to using the internet.

When designing digital content for health and social care, it is important to take into account the low literacy levels of many people in the UK. To provide a wider context, the National Literacy Trust estimates that 15% of adults in the UK are ‘functionally illiterate’¹¹. Whilst it can be tempting to assume that people with low literacy will only be able to participate digitally once they have improved their literacy, there are ways in which content on health and social care can be made more accessible:

- We often communicate with our service users who have low literacy using WhatsApp voice notes. Developing technology which allows health and social care services to send voice recordings to service users with low literacy could be a great improvement.
- We find that service users with low literacy are more likely to share videos and images on social media or to use live videos to communicate with their friends and family. Health and social care services wishing to reach wider networks with public

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/performance/digital-inclusion/digital-outcomes/regular-use>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/>

health messages should consider using more visual media, which does not rely on literacy to engage.

- Assistive technology which has been designed for people with visual impairments such as ‘Browsealoud’ could also be used to read audio versions of websites and digital content to people with low literacy¹². However, this will require some awareness raising amongst people with low literacy.

Skills and confidence

We asked participants to rate their skills and confidence in using digital technology on a scale. These were the findings:

Figure 3 – Digital skills and confidence in Gypsy and Traveller communities

| Skill level | Percentage of Gypsy and Traveller participants |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Cannot use technology | 36% |
| Can do simple tasks with help | 16% |
| Can do simple tasks without help | 26% |
| Can do complex tasks with help | 8% |
| Can do complex tasks without help | 14% |

In summary, 52% of Gypsy and Traveller research participants said they did not feel confident using digital technology by themselves. In comparison, the Oxford Internet Survey found in 2013, that 74% of the general population rate their ability to use the internet as good or excellent and Go ON UK/Ipsos Mori found in 2015 that 77% of adults have basic digital skills¹³¹⁴. This shows a notable gap in skills and confidence between Gypsy and Traveller communities and the general population and it is important that this is addressed.

Whilst some of those surveyed felt that they would never be able to digitally participate because of low literacy and a small handful of those surveyed said that they did not have an interest in digital participation. However, almost one fifth of Gypsies and Travellers we spoke to said that they would like to use the internet more but would need support. This is a promising statistic and suggests that there is an appetite within Gypsy and Traveller communities to be more included digitally. Whilst many great initiatives exist to support individuals to improve their digital skills, there may also be some barriers which make it

¹² <https://www.texthelp.com/en-gb/products/browsealoud.aspx>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/performance/digital-inclusion/digital-outcomes/skills-and-confidence>

¹⁴ Ibid

more difficult for some members of Gypsy and Traveller communities to benefit from these. The issues which need to be addressed include:

- **Literacy** – services aiming to promote digital inclusion may not be accustomed to supporting people with low literacy and may not have the staff, training or resources in place to do this well.
- **Classroom environment** – some Gypsies and Travellers may not have spent time in formal education and therefore may not be comfortable in a classroom environment. The 2011 Census found that 60% of Gypsies and Travellers had no formal qualifications¹⁵. Some Gypsies and Travellers may find the classroom environment daunting which could disrupt learning.
- **Understanding and acceptance** – many Gypsies and Travellers have experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation which may result in a reluctance to access digital inclusion services. From a service provider perspective, digital inclusion services may feel that they lack knowledge of Gypsy and Traveller culture or their understanding of Gypsies and Travellers may rely on assumptions based on negative media coverage of Gypsies and Travellers.

For reasons outlined above, it would be useful to develop a pilot digital inclusion project with Gypsy and Traveller communities. From this pilot project, principles of good practice could be identified which could then be used to inform mainstream digital inclusion projects across the country. This would follow in the footsteps of other successful schemes in health and social care. For example, Friends Families and Travellers are an accredited Royal Society of Public Health training centre for Gypsy and Traveller communities and have tailored the training so that Gypsy and Traveller communities will find it accessible and relevant¹⁶.

Access

Of those surveyed, only 38% of Gypsies and Travellers had a household internet connection, compared to 86% of the general population¹⁷. The most popular way to access the internet amongst interview participants was through mobile data. Over half of participants said that this was how they accessed the internet. Three out of 50 participants said that their only way to access the internet was through public wifi. It is unclear whether these respondents were aware of the security risks of connecting to public wifi.

¹⁵

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/whatdoesthe2011censustellusaboutthecharacteristicsofgypsyoririshtravellersinenglandandwales/2014-01-21>

¹⁶ <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/royal-society-for-public-health-training-for-gypsy-and-traveller-communities/>

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/performance/digital-inclusion/digital-outcomes/all-access>

Figure 4 – Internet access in Gypsy and Traveller communities

| Way of connecting to the internet | Percentage of respondents |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Wifi / broadband | 38% |
| Mobile data | 52% |
| Public wifi | 12% |

Initially, when we began this research, we expected to find that Gypsies in Travellers in bricks and mortar housing would be more likely to have a household internet connection than those living on sites or roadside. However, we found that amongst those living in housing, only six out of 18 people (33%) surveyed said that they had a household internet connection, less than the overall average of 38%. This suggests that it is not a structural issue with accommodation type which acts as a barrier to digital inclusion, but that other factors are at play. In order to identify key barriers to accessing the internet, we asked all interviewees if they used the internet as often as they liked and if there were any barriers stopping them. In addition to issues highlighted earlier in the paper on low literacy and lack of skills and confidence, the barriers identified were:

- **Data running out** - Of those surveyed, roughly one fifth of participants said that running out of data and not being able to afford any more was one of their biggest barriers to accessing the internet.
- **Cost** - A number of people who did not have a household internet connection said that cost was a prohibitive factor in this.
- **Signal** - A number of people who responded said that poor signal was a barrier to them accessing the internet. According to figures released as part of the Race Disparity Audit in August 2018, Gypsies and Travellers are the ethnic groups most likely to be living in rural locations with 24.7% of Gypsies and Travellers living rurally, compared to 18.5% of the general population. This suggests that Gypsies and Travellers may be disproportionately affected by challenges in ensuring high speed internet connections in rural areas.

The NHS has already made practical and positive steps to ensure that staff and patients have access to wifi in NHS settings across England. However, further steps are needed to ensure that the public have access to online health and social care information and services when outside NHS settings¹⁸. For example, in New Zealand, people can access the government's "Work and Income" website and online services for little or no cost, so even those who

¹⁸ <https://digital.nhs.uk/services/nhs-wifi>

cannot afford wifi or to top up their mobile data can benefit from their online services^{19²⁰}. If NHS England were to make similar steps, this could result in significant cost savings and decrease pressure on GP practices.

Conclusion

It is clear that an individual's ability to engage with digital content can reap huge benefits for their health and wellbeing. Digital inclusion improves patients' access to information about their health and wellbeing, helps to combat loneliness and improves awareness of services available to patients²¹. Our research shows that many Gypsies and Travellers experience digital exclusion. Gypsies and Travellers are less likely to use the internet regularly, less likely to possess digital skills and significantly less likely to have a household internet connection than the majority population. It is vital that these inequalities are kept in mind when commissioning digital health and social care services and that decisive steps are taken to narrow the digital divide.

About us

Friends Families and Travellers is a leading national charity that works on behalf of all Gypsies, Roma and Travellers regardless of ethnicity, culture or background.

Friends Families and Travellers is a member of the VCSE Health and Wellbeing Alliance, which is a partnership between the voluntary sectors and the health and care system to provide a voice and improve the health and wellbeing for all communities.

It has been established to:

- Facilitate integrated working between the voluntary and statutory sectors
- Support a two way flow of information between communities, the VCSE sector and policy leads
- Amplify the voice of the VCSE sector and people with lived experience to inform national policy
- Facilitate co-produced solutions to promote equality and reduce health inequalities

¹⁹ Thank you to Michaela Des Forges for highlighting this at a VCSE Health and Wellbeing Alliance working day.

²⁰ <https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/about-work-and-income/our-services/cheap-as-data/index.html>

²¹ <https://digital.nhs.uk/about-nhs-digital/our-work/digital-inclusion/digital-inclusion-in-health-and-social-care#return-on-investment>

Appendix A

Background of Gypsy and Traveller participants

- 17 participants were Romany Gypsy
- 15 participants were Irish Traveller
- 1 participant was Welsh Traveller
- 8 participants were New Travellers
- 8 participants were Travellers
- 1 participant was English Traveller

Appendix B

Technological Devices

We asked participants which devices they owned and found that:

- 32% of those surveyed did not own any devices which could connect to the internet
- Only one person out of 50 surveyed owned a desktop computer
- Only one in five people surveyed owned a laptop
- Only one in five people surveyed owned a tablet
- 32 out of 50 respondents surveyed owned a smartphone

Appendix C

How Gypsy and Traveller communities are using the internet

We asked participants what they use the internet for and found that:

- 62% of respondents use the internet for social media and email
- 38% of respondents use the internet to find out information on services available to them
- 24% of respondents use the internet for entertainment
- 20% of respondents use the internet for maps
- 20% of respondents use the internet to shop
- 14% of respondents use the internet to find out the news
- 12% of respondents use the internet for work