



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kemi Badenoch MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Equalities)

By email: 24 June 2020

Re: Equality Hub work on COVID-19 disparities

Dear Kemi,

We write as Co-chairs of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma, regarding the Equality Hub's next steps for work on COVID-19 disparities. We welcome plans for further work to understand the key drivers of disparities in risks and outcomes of COVID-19 and hope that a greater understanding will quickly translate into decisive and meaningful action to protect populations experiencing coronavirus related inequalities.

As a result of pre-existing health inequalities, combined with poverty, overcrowding and historic issues related to accommodation, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are at higher risk of being infected by COVID-19. In tandem, Gypsy, Roma 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 which may lead to risks of severe outcomes as a result of coronavirus.

Despite this, a historic failure to include Gypsy, Roma and Traveller ethnicity categories in the NHS Data Dictionary means that there was insufficient data available to carry out an analysis on the impact of coronavirus on members of these groups as part of the PHE review of disparities in risks and outcomes. On 8th June, we wrote to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to highlight our concern that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities' invisibility in the review may translate to a lack of action to address COVID-19 inequalities (letter enclosed). We are keen to hear how you will ensure Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities will be included in this work as you lead it forward.

We are pleased to see that next steps will include efforts to address gaps in the evidence base, commission new data, and consider how the collection of data can be improved upon. We are therefore eager to see that work on this important issue

takes clear steps to evidence the disparities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, and to tackle the stark inequalities these communities continue to face.

We are encouraged to hear that next steps will also involve reviewing the effectiveness and impact of current actions being undertaken by relevant government departments and their agencies to directly lessen disparities in infection and death rates of COVID-19, as well as engaging with Departmental Ministers. We are keen to hear if accommodation type will be included as a factor you will consider in this process, in particular, overcrowded housing and nomadic accommodation types including Traveller sites, roadside encampments and boats.

During lockdown, we wrote on a number of occasions to Ministers raising our concerns about the support and guidance available for people living roadside, living on Traveller sites and living on boats. There have been some helpful steps to address the public health risk to Gypsy and Traveller communities, such as a letter sent from the Minister for Communities to local authority Chief Executives highlighting the particular challenges faced by Gypsies and Travellers living in caravans. However, we are aware that many vulnerable individuals and families have been unable to socially distance or self-isolate during the height of lockdown due to living arrangements which present challenges to doing so.

In the PHE report, 'Beyond the data: Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on BAME groups', Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities were barely referred to, but concerns were particularly highlighted on the ability of local authorities to reduce poverty, social exclusion, and improving living and housing conditions for members of these groups, as well as to ensure prevention, testing and contact tracing would reach them. We are keen to hear how you will take forward PHE's recommendation from this report to "Ensure that COVID-19 recovery strategies actively reduce inequalities caused by the wider determinants of health to create long term sustainable change" in relation to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. We are also pleased to see that consideration will be given to build on and expand the stakeholder engagement work undertaken by PHE, to consolidate and develop the qualitative insights gained, and to explore how they may support further actions that should be taken to address the disparities highlighted. We would be keen to see further engagement taking place with organisations working on behalf of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, to gain qualitative insight in the firsthand effects the virus is having on communities and further understanding of the factors that are likely to be driving COVID-19 disparities among these communities. We would be open to convening a roundtable event between your office and representatives from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and organisations if this would be helpful to you.

Last but not least, we are pleased to hear that next steps will include strengthening and improving public health communications to ensure they can reach all communities across the country. We know that some members of Roma communities struggled to find translations of relevant information during critical periods of lockdown and that some members of Gypsy and Traveller communities had difficulties in accessing information because of digital exclusion or low levels of literacy. We are keen to hear how you will ensure all information and guidance is

accessible to people with low levels of fluency in English, low levels of digital inclusion and low levels of digital inclusion going forward, in line with the spirit of the Accessible Information Standard.

In tandem with this, we are aware that a piece of guidance 'Stay at home: Guidance for Gypsy, Traveller and Liveaboard Boater households with possible coronavirus (COVID-19) infection' was developed for Public Health England three months ago but has never been published. We are keen to hear what the status of this is and how you will ensure the specific needs of Gypsy, Roma, Traveller and Boater communities will be addressed in the creation of public health communications going forward.

We are grateful for your time and attention to this matter, and very much welcome further information about how you will ensure that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities do not remain sidelined or overlooked in work to address COVID-19 inequalities.

Yours sincerely

The image shows two handwritten signatures side-by-side. The signature on the left is 'Janet Whitaker' and the signature on the right is 'Kate Green'.

Baroness Janet Whitaker and Kate Green MP
Co-chairs, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Gypsies Travellers and Roma