

How to ensure patients living nomadically can access both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine

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As lockdown restrictions lift, it is likely that people across the UK will start to travel more – travelling has an important economic and social function for nomadic people. However, it is important to note that there are both push and pull factors for nomadism.

Often, people living on roadside camps and on boats will have to travel because of circumstances outside of their control, namely, because of evictions and continuous cruising rules. This is likely to increase as lockdown measures lift. For example, despite Government messaging calling for “no unnecessary travel”, a “complete ban on evictions” and staying at home for everyone living in England, evidence shows that in the 45 days following the change of Government messaging from “Stay at Home” to “Stay Alert” (10th May 2020) evictions of roadside camps increased by a staggering 333%¹.

Failure to comply with evictions can result in being imprisoned, fined or having your home removed². Similarly, many people living on boats are subject to strict ‘continuous cruising’ rules requiring them to move from place to place every 14 days in a continuous direction along the canal³. If Boaters fail to meet the requirements, they can have their boat license removed and potentially have their home seized.

Where a patient who has had the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine is planning to travel to a new area, you should communicate with healthcare services in that area and ask them to make plans to administer the second dose. Where a patient is worried that they may be evicted from the area or breach continuous cruising rules if they stay in the area, you should write a letter for relevant statutory agencies explaining the importance of them being able to stay in the area.

During the pandemic, the Government has asked local authorities to provide water, sanitation and waste disposal facilities to people living on roadside camps and to make alternative stopping places available⁴. Similarly, many waterways organisations have suspended their rules on continuous cruising. In this spirit, where a patient needs to stay in an area for their second dose of the vaccine, you should ask relevant statutory agencies to implement Negotiated Stopping⁵ or suspend continuous cruising rules during this period. Please find below a template letter which you can use:

¹ <https://www.movingforchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Local-authority-approaches-to-roadside-camps-in-a-time-of-COVID-FINAL.pdf>

² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/418139/150326_Dealing_with_illegal_and_unauthorised_encampments_-_final.pdf

³ <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/enjoy-the-waterways/boating/buy-your-boat-licence/continuous-cruising>

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/929125/COVID-19_-_mitigating_impacts_on_gypsy_traveller_communities.pdf

⁵ Negotiated Stopping is a term used to describe methods that Local Authorities can use to manage roadside camps in their area. Under this practice, a group of people living on a roadside camp agree with a Local Authority an area of land for them to stop on and rules for staying on that land. The Local Authority provide access to water, sanitation and rubbish disposal. This is a really important approach because of the national shortage of Traveller sites for people living nomadically to stop on. More info here: <https://www.negotiatedstopping.co.uk/what-is-negotiated-stopping>

“To whom it may concern,

I am writing on behalf of [patient name] to request that you [halt evictions and put in place negotiated stopping/temporarily waive continuous cruising rules] to ensure that this patient is able to access both doses of the COVID-19 vaccination.

It is important that this patient is able to stay in or close to [name area] for at least the next [insert time period], to ensure that they are able to access both the first and second dose of the vaccine, which will be administered locally.

{OPTIONAL} The patient has a diagnosis/diagnoses of [medical conditions], which means that they are within a priority category for vaccination. {OPTIONAL}

Thank you for supporting access to the COVID-19 vaccination.

Yours sincerely,

[Healthcare professional signature]”

If a patient from a Gypsy, Roma, Traveller or Boater community would like advice about their rights in relation to accommodation, healthcare, education or discrimination, you can signpost them to the Friends, Families and Travellers helpline where a member of our team will be able to offer support. Our helpline number is 01273 234 777 and it is open Monday-Friday, 10:00am-4:30pm, excluding Bank Holidays. Due to remote working during the pandemic, people who phone the helpline should leave a voicemail with their contact details and key information. A member of our national casework team will then arrange a call back.

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.

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