



Friends, Families and Travellers and the National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups' submission to the Public Services Committee Inquiry 'Public Services: lessons from coronavirus'

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Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are at higher risk of being infected by COVID-19 and at greater risk of severe outcomes as a result of contracting COVID-19. We are deeply concerned that the needs of members of these communities have been largely overlooked, and have not been a priority in the Government's planning and policy relating to coronavirus. The active exclusion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities from positive policymaking at the national level has had direct and evident repercussions at the local level. In the absence of clear, centralised guidance, we have seen a "postcode lottery" emerging in terms of how local actors have responded to the needs of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Whilst there has been some emergent evidence of good practice, there have been significant disparities from place to place.

Ultimately, we are concerned that the Government's response throughout coronavirus has been built on primarily political, rather than humanitarian motivations. We have seen that public services have quickly and comprehensively responded to the needs of some populations unable to shield or isolate during the lockdown. Despite this, we have not seen the same energy or action given to supporting members of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities similarly unable to enact government guidance or access basic amenities. This disparate response has intensified the chronic social exclusion Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities face, and has notable humanitarian and public health implications. We ask the Public Services Committee for scrutiny of these issues, and we are eager to see changes implemented so that the needs of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are met and addressed.

Key issues:

1. A lack of clear direction from central Government regarding evictions has resulted in a postcode lottery, with some local authorities continuing to evict Gypsies and Travellers during coronavirus (see page 3).
2. In the absence of clear lines of accountability, a sizeable number of local authorities have failed to adequately support Gypsies and Travellers to access water and sanitation during the height of lockdown (see page 6).
3. It remains unclear how the vast majority of nomadic households will access the Government's testing programme (see page 8).
4. Longstanding issues with access to healthcare for Gypsy and Traveller communities have worsened during lockdown (see page 10).
5. A significant number of children and young people from Gypsy and Traveller communities haven't received the support needed to participate in remote education (see page 12).



Background

There are estimated to be around 300,000 – 500,000 Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people in the UK.¹² 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.

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, higher overall prevalence of reported chest pain and cardiovascular conditions, and higher levels of respiratory problems.³⁴ This means that within Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, there is a disproportionately high representation of people at increased risk of severe illness from coronavirus.

Within Gypsy and Traveller communities, around three quarters of people live in bricks and mortar housing, whilst around 10,000 people live either 'roadside' on unauthorised encampments or on owned land without planning permission to live there, and 70,000 people live on Gypsy or Traveller sites.⁵⁶ In contrast, the population of migrant Roma in England predominantly reside in bricks and mortar housing in urban and multi-ethnic areas, and many Roma are living in overcrowded and insecure accommodation.⁷ In addition to this, around 15,000 people in England live in boats on canals and waterways⁸.

At Friends, Families and Travellers, we support over 1300 Gypsy and Traveller families across the UK each year with issues they are experiencing related to accommodation, health, education, discrimination and more. In the weeks following the beginning of lockdown, calls to our helpline roughly doubled. We are concerned that a significant number of households are experiencing crisis related to coronavirus and lockdown and have not received the support from Government that they need.

¹ Council of Europe (n.d.) 'Roma and Travellers Team'. Last accessed 11 Mar 2019. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/roma/>

² Brown et al., (2013) 'Migrant Roma in the UK' https://www.salford.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1155666/Migrant_Roma_in_the_UK_final_report_October_2013.pdf

³ Smolinska – Poffley, G. (2017), "Health Inequalities for Roma communities in the United Kingdom". Health and Social Care Briefing: Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Equality and Inclusion. House of Lords, 4 October 2017.

⁴ Parry et al (2007) 'Health status of Gypsies and Travellers in England'. J Epidemiol Community Health. 2007 Mar; 61(3): 198–204.

⁵ There are around 3000 households living roadside, so we have estimated 3.3-3.5 people per household.

⁶ There are around 20,000 households living on sites, so we have estimated 3.3-3.5 people per household.

⁷ Brown et al., (2013) 'Migrant Roma in the UK'

https://www.salford.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1155666/Migrant_Roma_in_the_UK_final_report_October_2013.pdf

⁸ <https://www.rboa.org.uk/q-a/>



Issue 1 - Evictions

We initially welcomed the action taken by the Government to support the UK population to remain in stable accommodation during this national crisis, and the protection provided to renters in particular. When the Government announced a “complete ban on evictions” we had hoped that Gypsy and Traveller communities, in particular for families living roadside, would be included in this. From a human rights perspective, the suspension of evictions would enable families to find a safe place to pull up and access amenities they needed whilst from a public health perspective, it would prevent the transmission of coronavirus from one area to another.

On 27th March 2020, the Court and Tribunals Judiciary updated their rules on some eviction methods, namely Civil Procedure Rules Part 55, stating;

‘All proceedings for housing possession brought under CPR Part 55 and all proceedings seeking to enforce an order for possession by a warrant or writ of possession are stayed for a period of 90 days from today, 27th March 2020.’⁹

This was positive news as CPR Part 55 is used for Gypsy and Traveller sites and unauthorised encampments. However, on 20th April 2020, the Master of the Rolls and the Lord Chancellor signed an Amending Practice Direction which withdrew and updated the rules so households living on unauthorised encampments were no longer protected.¹⁰

The decision to withdraw these legal protections has significant public health implications and is in direct contrast with the clear protections put in place by the Welsh and Scottish Governments during this time.

The Welsh Government guidance states the following -

“Local authorities should not evict unauthorised encampments, unless there are immediate and substantial risks to public safety arising from continued occupation where eviction is considered necessary, an alternative suitable location should be identified by the Local Authority. As part of resilience planning, Local authorities may need to pro-actively identify potential locations. Local authorities should seek to work with private landowners to avoid eviction or harassment if at all possible.”¹¹

Scottish Government guidance states the following -

⁹ <https://www.judiciary.uk/announcements/117th-practice-direction-update-to-the-civil-procedure-rules-coronavirus-pandemic-related/>

¹⁰ https://linkproTECT.cudasvc.com/url?a=https%3a%2f%2fwww.judiciary.uk%2fannouncements%2f120th-practice-direction-update-to-the-civil-procedure-rules-coronavirus-pandemic-related%2f&c=E,1,240fZhy2C6ty5TqmVzo83Ta_GrQHkVsKjJt_SKOO2yxwzZhymKO-DwApcmDGvnVTfA1hWMIzy4sIbOSVI-AMWEejBJcOm3Sb3aX-yol9&typo=1

¹¹ <https://gov.wales/guidance-those-supporting-gypsy-and-traveller-communities>



“In terms of roadside encampments: eviction or moving on should only be considered where the location of an encampment is unsuitable for health or safety reasons. In this case, an alternative, suitable location should be identified; and Local Authorities should seek to work with private landowners to avoid eviction if at all possible.”¹²

Following the Government decision to withdraw legal protection from evictions for families living roadside on unauthorised encampments, the Minister for Communities wrote to local authority Chief Executives outlining ways in which councils could mitigate impacts of coronavirus on Gypsy and Traveller communities¹³. We were disappointed to see that this contained no reference to halting evictions. In practical terms, in the absence of strong guidance such as that provided in Scotland and Wales, diffuse responsibility for decision-making has resulted in significant disparities in the use of eviction powers, and in the support local authorities have provided.

In contradiction of the Government messaging on “no unnecessary travel”, a “complete ban on evictions” and staying at home, we are aware that a number of local authorities have continued to evict Travellers from pillar to post. Evidence gathered by The National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups illustrates that, (report due July 2020) between 23rd March (the start of lockdown) and 10th May (when the Government’s message switched from “Stay Home” to “Stay Alert”) we are aware of at least 9 evictions of families on unauthorised encampments. Between 10th May and 24th June we know of a further 39 evictions – an increase of 333%.

Each time a family is evicted, they need to start from scratch in getting access to water, sanitation and refuse collection. Being forced to travel and engage with enforcement agents puts the entire household at higher risk of catching coronavirus. The lack of guidance advising that all evictions must be suspended at this time has exacerbated the threat posed to public health and fails to protect communities facing disproportionate risk of contracting, and facing severe outcomes from, COVID-19.

Whilst failure to protect families living on the roadside from evictions has had a significant and far-reaching impact nationally, we have been pleased to see that some Local Authorities have taken decisive action to halt the use of eviction powers in the interests of public health and have put in place [Negotiated Stopping](#). Below are some examples of local authorities who have responded positively to the needs of Gypsies and Travellers on unauthorised encampments during this time.

¹² <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-supporting-gypsy-traveller-communities/documents/supporting-gypsy-travellers/supporting-gypsy-travellers/govscot%3Adocument/Covid%2B19%2BFramework%2Bfor%2BLocal%2BAuthorities%2Bon%2BSupporting%2BGypsy-Travellers%2B-%2BV4.pdf>

¹³

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/882564/COVID-19_-_mitigating_impacts_on_gypsy___traveller_communities.pdf



Good practice examples

Cornwall County Council

As part of their emergency response to Covid-19, Cornwall County Council put in place a temporary policy for unauthorised encampments, recognising that members of the Gypsy and Traveller communities would be very vulnerable to the virus, especially if they were not on a properly facilitated site. The policy they put in place followed the guidance set out by Friends, Families and Travellers and recommends that where possible, they would direct an unauthorised encampment to their transit site. If this was occupied, they would seek to tolerate in the current location if it was safe to do so. If it was not deemed safe, they would ask the families to move to the nearest piece of land where it was safe to tolerate them. In addition, they would seek to provide water, toilets and waste collection, subject to being able to access providers who could provide them.

Cheshire West and Cheshire Council

In Cheshire West there is an agreement to provide an 'accepted' encampment on a piece of land in Ellesmere Port. They have previously run this in this location for 7 years and there is a plan in place to use it again as and when required. This would be used for larger groups, if they were to arrive - there is room for 8-14 caravans, there is access to a standpipe of water, emergency lighting and portable toilets would be supplied. All the councils within Cheshire agreed at the start of this pandemic to allow encampments to stay where they were and carry out no evictions, as well as providing services.

Fenland Council

There are no unauthorised encampments at present but the Council has agreed in partnership with the County Council to provide water from Anglia Water i.e. standpipes and they will consider other options if this is not feasible on any location. Again, in partnership with the County Council, they will supply WCs and a refuse service. The Council has a transit site, with full amenities already in place and have identified/ are identifying in partnership with the County and other local Councils temporary sites for those shielding; those isolating who cannot do so safely on a local authority site and a halting area for people still travelling.



Issue 2 - Disparities in efficiency of action to ensure access to basic amenities

Around 3000 families living roadside on unauthorised encampments or on other unauthorised land have historic issues with accessing water and sanitation¹⁴. This has been exacerbated by events related to coronavirus, such as leisure centres and water points closing, making it harder or impossible in some cases to access. Lack of access to water and sanitation makes it incredibly difficult to follow the Government guidance on hand washing and hygiene and difficult or impossible to follow the guidance on remaining indoors while self-isolating and shielding.

This has been addressed as a matter of urgency in Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, yet the Government was much slower off the mark in responding to the basic water and sanitation needs of Gypsies and Travellers in England. The World Health Organisation declared coronavirus a pandemic on 11th March 2020 and lockdown began in the UK on 23rd March 2020, however, the Minister for Communities did not write to local authorities outlining that they could support people to access water and sanitation until the 11th April 2020¹⁵¹⁶.

Whilst the letter recognises some of the challenges that Gypsies and Travellers face when living on roadside camps, the in many cases local authorities have not gone far enough to ensure amenities are provided. In comparison, the direction to local authorities on provision of a safe space for rough sleepers to shield and self-isolate was much stronger.

A lack of clear national guidance has resulted in a lack of clarity within local authorities as to the level of support they are required to give and which team is responsible for resolving this issue. Despite the pressing nature of this concern, and the significant implications this has for public health, our caseworkers have come across apparent resource and efficiency issues within many local authorities, with no clear team or actor responsible for meeting the needs of those without access to basic amenities. Many families in desperate need of access to water have become stuck in referral loops, with no one taking direct responsibility for action, and with each team within the local authority stating that it is the duty of another team to offer support.

Case study highlighting inefficiency issues in attempting to secure support from a local authority during Covid-19

At the height of the lockdown, a group of Irish Traveller families living in caravans contacted the Friends, Families and Travellers helpline for support, as they were lacking basic amenities such as water and sanitation. The group were unable to install amenities to the

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/848868/TCC_November19_Stats_Release.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>

¹⁶ <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-MITIGATING-IMPACTS-ON-GYPSY-TRAVELLER-COMMUNITIES.pdf>



land as they were yet to obtain planning permission, which had been delayed because of the crisis.

This was of particular concern in the midst of the pandemic as family members were in the 'clinically vulnerable' and 'extremely vulnerable' category. Amongst the group were a pregnant mother in the third trimester, a number of children, and individuals with mental and physical health conditions, including coronary heart disease and emphysema. The families needed support to follow the public health guidelines, including the need to shield, so we approached the local authority to see what support could be secured. To begin with we contacted Adult Social Services as they had already provided a gas bottle for cooking/heating.

After two weeks of pursuing support through Adult Social Services to no avail, we contacted the local Wellbeing Hub. This service agreed to investigate the situation but subsequently, due to the presence of children, the matter was then passed from the Wellbeing Hub to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). Another two weeks passed by and the vulnerable families received no contact from any local authority agencies. We were then advised that MASH had referred the families back to the Adult Social Care Team. A number of weeks had passed with this community of families struggling to access very basic amenities needed to follow the public health guidelines. We do not know if any support was ever established as we have lost contact with the families.

This case highlights the difficulty in accessing support for some families, even with the support of a national advocacy organisation. The families were stuck in a 'referral loop'. Pinpointing the correct teams within local authorities, and how to get in touch with them, proved problematic.



Issue 3 - Test and trace

We welcomed the launch of the Test and Trace programme on the 28th May, and the Government's stated aim to make it *"as easy as possible for everyone who has symptoms to access a test quickly"*, with a variety of means of accessing testing available.¹⁷ However, as the programme took shape, we became extremely concerned that the means of accessing testing would be inaccessible for a significant number of nomadic people in England.

Those living on unauthorised encampments and with no fixed address will generally be unable to receive home testing kits. Therefore, for many people living roadside, the main option available for accessing testing is by drive-through regional testing sites. However, many people will have large live-in vehicles and towing vehicles as their primary vehicle, and from an accessibility perspective, it does not appear that vehicle size has been taken into consideration for all drive-in centre testing points. Since there are significant challenges for home testing, it is vital that drive-in centres are accessible.

Similarly, whilst Gypsies and Travellers living roadside continue to experience threats of and actual evictions, there is a risk that people living on unauthorised encampments will not want to travel to drive-in centres because of an understandable fear that they will not be able to return to the land they were pulled up on. This is of great concern for households with coronavirus symptoms. If a family were to be evicted or prevented from returning to land when accessing testing, the family would have to start from scratch in accessing water and sanitation. This would not be possible without coming into contact with members of the public.

On a similar vein, the vast majority of people living on boats under continuous cruising rules will not be able to receive home testing kits and also are less likely to have a car or road vehicle to enable them to access a drive-in centre. Even if people were to have a vehicle available, they would have to travel along a towpath to access this. On the waterways, there has been a higher than usual footfall with members of the general population taking their daily exercise and the narrow nature of the towpaths means it would often be impossible to socially distance on the towpath. This means the vast majority of people living on the waterways will not be able to safely access testing under the current plans.

We first raised these concerns with the Department of Health and Social Care on the 20th May 2020, but were only contacted by a member of the testing team on the 28th May 2020. On the same day, we developed a clear and detailed briefing document to make it as easy as possible for the programme team to develop a testing service that is inclusive service for nomadic communities, but at the date of writing, we still have no clear answer from Government about how the vast majority of people from nomadic communities can access testing at this time.

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/nhs-test-and-trace-how-it-works>



While we understand that issues like these are likely to be solved at a local authority level, it is unclear whether the specific considerations for Gypsy, Traveller and Boater communities will be taken into account. There is a need for clear guidance to be developed and a clear pathway for members of Gypsy, Traveller and Boater communities who are having struggles in accessing testing to follow, but despite numerous requests for this information, we are still in the dark. Historically, the existence of the National Association for Health Visitors for Gypsies and Travellers and the practice of having a named lead (often a health visitor) in every local authority area would have been able to support with this, but as local health and care systems have evolved, too often the needs of Gypsies and Travellers have been forgotten.

As with other areas of policymaking, we have seen a lack of coordination at the national level in terms of how public services should meet the needs of Gypsy and Traveller communities. While undoubtedly, some local authorities will take initiative to ensure everyone has access to testing, we are deeply concerned that many members of Gypsy, Traveller and Boater communities will be missed from the Government's test and trace approach. Given the significant health inequalities experienced by Gypsy and Traveller communities, we are concerned that this will lead to preventable transmission of coronavirus and ultimately to loss of life.



Issue 4 - Access to primary care

The first principle of the [NHS constitution](#) sets out that the “NHS provides a comprehensive service, available to all”. In particular, the principle highlights that the NHS “has a wider social duty to promote equality through the services it provides and to pay particular attention to groups or sections of society where improvements in health and life expectancy are not keeping pace with the rest of the population.”

Despite this, difficulties in accessing health care due to wrongful refusal to register within primary care is a longstanding issue faced by Gypsy and Traveller communities when accessing primary healthcare services.¹⁸ The results of a research exercise launched by Friends Families and Travellers in 2019 found that 24 out of 50 general practices mystery shopped in England refused to register a member of the Traveller community because they had no fixed address and/or no proof of identification¹⁹. In keeping with these findings, in a report released in 2018, Doctors of the World shared that out of a total of 2189 attempts to register patients, patient registration was refused on 419 occasions²⁰. The UN Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have all previously called on the UK Government to address this issue.²¹

During lockdown, we have seen an increase in the number of people being refused for registration for primary care services or who have found registration processes inaccessible. We are concerned that we have and will continue to see a widening of the gap in access to health care services as a result of increased pressure on and increased digitisation of health care services. Research conducted by Friends, Families and Travellers in 2018 found high levels of digital exclusion in Gypsy and Traveller communities, with over half of participants reporting that they did not feel confident using digital technology by themselves.²²

Given the extent of this issue, and particularly given the importance of healthcare access during this period, we have been eager to see action taken to address this, and to ensure that this issue is not exacerbated by the current additional pressures primary healthcare services are facing. Although this issue was highlighted in a letter sent to general practice regarding COVID-19, with NHS England reminding services that “*practices should continue to register new patients, including those with no fixed address, asylum seekers and refugees*”, we are concerned that this does not go far enough to address the problem²³.

As the country went into lockdown, we understood that many services were having to change their way of operating rapidly for a short period of time, but as it becomes clearer that this period is likely

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/No-room-at-the-inn-findings-from-mystery-shopping-GP-practices.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Registration-Refused-final.pdf>

²¹ Ibid.

²² <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Digital-Inclusion-in-Gypsy-and-Traveller-communities-FINAL-1.pdf>

²³ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/wp-content/uploads/sites/52/2020/03/gp-preparedness-update-letter-27-march-2020-.pdf>



to be longer than we originally anticipated and that there is a high chance many healthcare services are likely to embrace a digital first approach to delivery it is essential that the equalities implications of this are understood and addressed as a matter of urgency.

GP access case study

During lockdown, an individual contacted the Friends, Families and Travellers helpline and requested support to access primary healthcare services. They had previously faced substantial difficulty registering in the local area, and required GP registration to access necessary support and medication for a long-term condition.

The caller had initially been refused registration at one local GP surgery as they had no fixed address. A second GP surgery had stated that they would register the individual, and agreed to use the surgery as a “care of” address, but stated that registration would need to be completed online. The caller informed the surgery that they had low literacy levels and no access to a computer, but were advised that the practice was only accepting registrations online.

In this instance, a caseworker from Friends, Families and Travellers completed the online registration form on the caller’s behalf, and contacted the surgery to clarify that this had been accepted. Without this support, the caller would have been unable to register, and would have been left without access to relevant treatment and support for their ongoing health needs.



Issue 5 - Education

Of almost any group in England, young Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people face some of the greatest issues in accessing and benefiting from the education system. Pre-existing issues in how schools engage with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities coupled with long-standing educational inequalities within the communities means that there is a real risk that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils will be left behind during the country's lockdown and ongoing response to the coronavirus pandemic.

According to statistics released as part of the Race Disparity Audit, pupils from the Gypsy/Roma and Irish Traveller ethnic groups had the lowest average score in GCSEs of any ethnic group in 2016/7²⁴. Inequalities in educational attainment start at a young age, with figures released just last week revealing that only 34% of Gypsy/Roma children and only 37% of Irish Traveller children met the expected standards in maths in year 2, compared to 76% of pupils in the general population²⁵.

Supporting children with their education during lockdown presents challenges in the vast majority of households with school aged children and young people at this time. However, we are concerned that a number of issues have placed Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils at a significant risk of falling behind during this period. These include:

- Qualification level of parents or carers – 60% of people over the age of 16 years old in Gypsy and Traveller communities have no formal qualifications²⁶. This means that many parents may be in a position where they are being asked to support their children with a level of education which they themselves have not been taught to, or may have been taught to, but not received a qualification in.
- Levels of literacy of parents or carers – At Friends Families and Travellers, we support over 1300 families each year with issues relating to accommodation, education, welfare and much more. Based on our routine data collection, we have calculated that around 40% of our service users have low or no literacy. There is a concern that this will act as a severe limiting factor for parents aiming to support children with their education during the pandemic.
- Levels of digital inclusion – In 2018, we conducted research with 50 members of Gypsy and Traveller communities which found that one in five Gypsy and Traveller participants had never used the internet; over half of Gypsy and Traveller participants said that they did not

²⁴ Race Disparity Audit (2018) 'Ethnicity facts and figures'. Last accessed 12 Mar 2019. Available at: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/>

²⁵ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/5-to-7-years-old/mathematics-attainments-for-children-aged-5-to-7-key-stage-1/latest>

²⁶

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/datasets/2011censusanalysiswhatdoesthe2011censustellusaboutthecharacteristicsofgypsyoririshtravellersinenglandandwales>



feel confident using digital technology by themselves; and only 38% of Gypsies and Travellers (33% if housed) had a household internet connection, compared to 86% of the general population²⁷. 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 and three out of 50 participants said that their only way to access the internet was through public wifi. In addition to issues highlighted in relation to literacy and confidence levels, the key barriers to digital inclusion identified were data running out, cost and signal (Gypsies and Traveller are the ethnic groups most likely to be living in rural locations). 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 and 32 out of 50 respondents surveyed owned a smartphone. This has clear and immediate ramifications for delivering teaching online.

- Overcrowded learning environments – By nature, nomadic homes are necessarily small, however, their inhabitants often spend lots of time in the outdoors. Current Government restrictions on staying at home make this more difficult, especially when we take into account the large family size typical of Gypsy and Traveller communities. This can create an environment where it is difficult to home-school children due to the increased risk of distraction and lack of space.

Given the above, it is likely that remote education will exacerbate existing inequalities in the education system. It is absolutely essential that resources are invested into catch up education and remote tutoring for those hardest hit.

At the local level, we have seen that recognition of these challenges, and the level of support provided to families, has varied substantially from place to place, and from school to school. We have received reports that schools in Rotherham and Liverpool have taken a proactive approach to supporting Roma families, by delivering educational packs and supporting with access to necessary materials. However, this is not reflected across the board.

Some schools are only providing work for children online and are refusing to print packs off for children. We have received reports that in some instances, schools have stated that Gypsy and Traveller families experiencing digital exclusion should be able to access online resources as families have access to mobile phone devices. However, this fails to consider that many sites have poor internet connectivity, or no internet, placing these families at a considerable disadvantage for accessing resources, as well as the limited nature of work that can be done on a mobile phone.

Ultimately, we are concerned that when children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children return to school that for many children, disadvantages in their experiences of remote schooling during

²⁷ <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Digital-Inclusion-in-Gypsy-and-Traveller-communities-FINAL-1.pdf>



lockdown may place them at a significant disadvantage compared to other children of their age group. Given the pre-existing level of inequalities within the education system for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, it is imperative that support is offered to children to catch up with pupils in their cohort.

Education good practice

About 85 of the 420 pupils at St Matthew's Primary School in Ipswich are Roma. The school had previously hired a Romanian Roma translator to support with tasks such as translating school letters, and helping families with any concerns.²⁸ This is reported to have had a positive impact on attendance and educational outcomes for Roma children at the school. Roma Support Group have reported that, during the lockdown, the school have funded the translator to provide relevant and appropriate translated resources for Roma children, to ensure that Roma children do not miss out on access to education over this period.

Roma Support Group have also reported that the Queen Catherine Academy in Peterborough have been working proactively to provide relevant resources to local Slovak and Czech Roma communities. There are a number of Roma staff employed at the school who have been preparing resource packs and delivering these directly to families to support Roma families with education at home during lockdown.

²⁸ BBC (2019) 'Roma translator boosts pupils' learning and health at 38-language school' Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-suffolk-48597249>



Key concerns going forward

As we move into the next stages of the coronavirus response, there are a number of key concerns to highlight and to consider in the transformation of public services:

- Many families living in multi-generational households, in particular on Traveller sites, are fearful of sending children back to school due to inability to self-distance from vulnerable members of the household and community. We are concerned that some schools will perceive this to be an excuse for non-attendance, when in reality all families will have to make difficult decisions to protect and safeguard vulnerable members. For children who are unable to attend for longer, we are concerned that at some stage schools will reinstate penalties for school absence, or that access to free school meals will be affected, that non-attendance will mean that a child loses their place in school, or that some children will fall significantly behind at school. It is important that the impact of increased risk to overcrowded or multi-generational households is considered by schools so that steps can be taken to ensure that those children who don't return as quickly as others are not left behind.
- The rapid digitisation of healthcare services risks leaving those at the sharp edge of inequalities and experiencing high levels of digital exclusion behind. We are concerned that a consideration of inequalities implications will not be embedded throughout decision-making, and that aspects of service provision may increasingly become digital by default.
- A historic failure to include Gypsy, Roma and Traveller ethnicity categories in the NHS Data Dictionary means that there is insufficient data available to carry out an analysis on the impact of coronavirus on members of these groups, and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities remain largely invisible in discussions on disparities in severity of outcomes from COVID-19. We are concerned that this may translate to a lack of action to address COVID-19 inequalities.
- As lockdown measures lift, we are concerned that a lack of clear direction from Government means that there won't be a clear and safe plan for Gypsy and Traveller families living roadside going forward.



Recommendations

1. The Government should appoint a Minister to lead the Government's response to COVID-19 in Gypsy and Traveller communities and ensure the needs of the communities are sufficiently prioritised.
2. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should issue clear and detailed guidance on how to support families who have no access to water, sanitation and refuse collection, including as we transition out of lockdown.
3. Each local authority should establish a named individual who will be responsible for co-ordinating support for Gypsies and Travellers at this time.
4. Public Health England and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should release guidance on how people living roadside, on Traveller sites or on boats can self-isolate, as a matter of urgency.
5. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should send clear guidance to all local authorities halting all evictions, which is even more crucial where a household has possible or confirmed cases of coronavirus.
6. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government with the Department of Health and Social Care should develop clear guidance for local authorities on how to support nomadic communities to access testing.
7. The Department of Health and Social Care should publish clear information on how to access testing for members of nomadic communities.
8. Every local authority should have a named person responsible for supporting Gypsies and Travellers through coronavirus, preferably a health visitor.
9. NHS England should develop clear guidance for all health and care services on how to ensure equitable health care for populations experiencing digital exclusion.
10. The Care Quality Commission should maintain a focus during upcoming inspections on equity of health care for populations experiencing digital exclusion.
11. All children whose parents have no formal qualifications and/or low levels of literacy and who are unable to return to school as planned should have optional access to a home tutor for the duration of their remote education.
12. The Department for Education should fund schools to deliver catch up education for those children and young people disadvantaged by the lockdown.



13. All households with insufficient access to digital devices for the period of lockdown, should be offered a tablet or laptop for each school aged child or young person.
14. All households with insufficient access to internet to support education at home during lockdown, should be offered a dongle or other means of accessing the internet at no cost.
15. All households with no access to a printer or paper resources for home education should have these delivered to them.
16. Children and young people from households where overcrowding may make it difficult to learn at home should be eligible to continue to attend school.
17. The Government must commence work in developing a cross-departmental Government Strategy to address the inequalities experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

Conclusion

We are deeply concerned that the unique needs of members of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities have often been overlooked or not considered a priority in the delivery of public services during lockdown and in relation to coronavirus. We ask the Public Services Committee to provide scrutiny and hold the Government to account for their treatment of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities at this time.

The inequalities experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people have been exacerbated by COVID-19 but have in fact been laid bare for decades. In 2019, in response to the Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry 'Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities' the Government committed to developing a Strategy to address the race disparities. However, there has been no notable progress on this, with Westminster lagging far behind Wales, Scotland and Ireland, whose Governments all have a working Strategy in place. We urge the Public Services Committee to press the Government to fulfil its commitment to develop a cross-departmental Government Strategy to achieve a more equitable landscape for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people.



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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The National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups is a national charity of some 20 member organisations across England, Scotland and Wales working specifically with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people.

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