

Rt Hon Matt Hancock

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick

Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government

Rt Hon Rebecca Pow

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

24th March 2020

COVID-19 – Gypsy, Traveller and Boater communities

Dear Secretaries of State,

We write to you to raise our concern about the lack of Government information, advice or action to support Gypsy, Traveller or Boater communities during the coronavirus pandemic.

Around 10,000 Gypsy and Traveller people are living roadside on unauthorised encampments at this time, around 70,000 people are living on Gypsy or Traveller sites and around 15,000 people are living on canals and waterwaysⁱⁱⁱⁱⁱⁱ.

Gypsy 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^{iv}. This means that within Gypsy and Traveller communities, there is a disproportionately high representation of people at increased risk of severe illness from coronavirus.

Despite this, the guidance released by Public Health England on self-isolation has no information on how to self-isolate on an unauthorised encampment, on a Traveller site or on a boat, nor advises if this is possible, given the confined living space which goes hand in hand with nomadic living. Whilst signatories of the letter have been working with PHE on developing such guidance, the process has been slow, so nothing has yet been published.

Further to this, in the absence of any clear guidance to local authorities, those who manage Traveller sites and those who manage canals and waterways, the majority of the 95,000 or more people living roadside, on sites and on boats may not have the support they require to follow Government guidance to ensure safety during the pandemic. For example,

- Around 3000 families living roadside have limited or no access to water and sanitation;
- A number of local authorities continue to evict Traveller families from pillar to post; and
- Many Traveller site managers are unaware of the basic actions they need to undertake to enable site residents to self-isolate where needed.

Please note that to our knowledge, in the absence of advice from Government, members of Gypsy, Traveller and Boater communities are taking the threat of coronavirus seriously and individuals are doing all that they can to look after their own health and the health of others with the information and resources available to them.

Whilst we welcome the measures the Government has put in place to date by banning evictions and offering additional protection for renters, there is no clear information on if or how this applies to people living on an unauthorised encampment, on a Traveller site or on a boat.

In addition, whilst we welcome the measures the Government has put in place to date to support workers, it is clear that these have not gone far enough for people in self-employment who represent over a quarter of Gypsies and Travellers^v.

In April 2019, Women and Equalities Committee Chair Maria Miller said, "Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people have been comprehensively failed by policy makers and public services for far too long"^{vi}. We are deeply concerned that this is evident in the Government's response to the coronavirus pandemic, and that this will have a devastating impact on Gypsy, Traveller and Boater members of our society. Therefore, we are asking for your Departments to **urgently respond to the following requests**:

- Public Health England should issue clear guidance on self-isolation for people living on unauthorised encampments, on Traveller sites and on boats;
- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in partnership with Public Health England should issue clear guidance for local authorities, those who manage Traveller sites and those who manage canals and waterways on how they can and should support Gypsies, Travellers and Boaters at this time;
- All evictions of unauthorised encampments should be stopped and a [Negotiated Stopping](#) approach to unauthorised encampments should be adopted across the UK;
- The Government should work with local authorities to ensure everyone living on an unauthorised encampment has access to basic water and sanitation;
- The Government should work to ensure protections being put in place for renters are extended to those living on Gypsy and Traveller sites and on canals and waterways;
- The Government should put in place an adequate support package for people in self-employment.

Whilst we have outlined above our concerns about the specific issues faced by Gypsy, Traveller and Boater communities, we know that members of these communities share concerns collectively experienced by other protected characteristic groups or Inclusion Health groups. For example, we know that a number of businesses are now no longer accepting cash, which means that members of Gypsy and Traveller communities without bank accounts may struggle to purchase the basics they need to survive. We therefore request that:

- The Government sets up a working group to identify and respond to issues faced by protected characteristic and vulnerable groups as and when they arise, with representation from all protected characteristic and vulnerable groups.

Now is a time to come together and work to tackle the issues we collectively face as a society. We are more than happy to offer our support in any way we can to Ministers and policy makers in putting in place the guidance, policy and legislation the Government will need to support Gypsy, Traveller and Boater communities at this time.

We hope that this letter reaches you in good health.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Mann, Director, Friends, Families and Travellers

Marc Willers QC, Garden Court Chambers

Alice Young, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Team Leader, Julian House

Helen Jones, CEO, and Elizabeth Spaven, Chair, Leeds GATE

Dr Nigel Hewett OBE, Secretary to the Faculty for Homeless and Inclusion Health

Omar Khan, Director, Runnymede Trust

Dr Raphael Rogans-Watson, Kingston Hospital NHS Trust, Elderly Care and Inclusion Health Registrar,
Pathway Clinical Fellow

Professor Margaret Greenfields

Ali Harris, Chief Executive, Equally Ours

Betty Smith-Billington, Chair, Kushti Bok

Paul Boucher, Director, Lincolnshire Traveller Initiative

Chris Johnson, Partner, Community Law Partnership Solicitors

Josie O Driscoll, CEO, GATE Herts

Rosalind Bragg, Director, Maternity Action

Tyler Hatwell, Founder, Traveller Pride

Yvonne MacNamara, CEO, Traveller Movement

Debby Kennett, Chief Executive, London Gypsies & Travellers

Jasmine Jones, Co-ordinator, Gypsy Traveller Wales

Dr Siobhan Spencer MBE, Volunteer Co-ordinator, Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group

Adrian Jones, Policy Officer, National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups

Pamela Smith, Chair, National Bargee Travellers Association

Sherrie Smith, Gypsies and Travellers Essex

Cym de Souza, Chief Executive of Arawak Walton Housing Association and Chair of BME National

Lisa Gavin, Clinical Lead Surrey 0-19 Inclusion Health and Gypsy and Traveller Projects, Children and
Family Health Surrey

Charles Kwaku-Odoi, Chief Officer, Caribbean & African Health Network,

Fizza Qureshi, CEO, Migrants' Rights Network

Tebussum Rashid, Deputy Chief Executive, BTEG

Travelling Ahead Service - TGP Cymru

Reverend Roger Redding, Chairman of the Chaplain to Gypsy Traveller Support Group, Diocese of Salisbury, Member of Kushti Bok Gypsy and Traveller Group

Win Lawlor, Strategic Policy and Partnerships Manager, Irish Community Care

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

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

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.rboa.org.uk/q-a/>

^{iv} https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.43714!/file/GT-final-report-for-web.pdf

^v

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

^{vi} <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/women-and-equalities-committee/news-parliament-2017/grt-tackling-inequalities-report-published-17-19/>