

The impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic upon Romani and Traveller communities in Wales, 2020

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Introduction

This report is written with the intention of providing some introductory assessment of the significant effect that the worldwide pandemic has had upon Romani and Traveller¹ communities in Wales and, to some degree, England. The report will examine the various sources of information and advice that have been provided by, or solicited from government, both local and national, voluntary sector, health services², the media and Romani and Traveller organisations. Much of this is intended to reach the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller communities, especially those living ‘on the road’ during the crisis at its height and the appropriateness of that approach with its success in reaching Romani people will be assessed. The preliminary findings reflect the situation currently, in the context of the pandemic, from desktop research alone, as personal interviews with local authority officers, police officers, national politicians and members of the Romani and Traveller communities themselves have not been possible, except in rare instances where VoIP and video conferencing have been carried out³.

Thus, this is a brief assessment of the impact at a particular point in time (late September 2020), when the pandemic is again threatening to overwhelm health services in the U.K. and force the governments therein to re-impose some of the more strict measures to control the spread of the disease amongst the population at large⁴. The Welsh government has re-imposed fairly extensive restrictions throughout the country, with the capital and many of the cities under ‘lock-down’, including many local authority Gypsy and Traveller sites, effectively covering two-thirds of the population in Wales⁵. The latest update of the situation means that Wales will go into a second national ‘lock-down’, albeit for a period that is intended to be shorter rather than longer⁶. Such a move will impact heavily upon already vulnerable groups, such as the lower-paid and small businesses, as there will be a gap in support for workers and companies from the Welsh government⁷ before a new *Job Support Scheme* comes into force from the Treasury. Low-income families will be especially hard-hit, including the Romani and Traveller communities in Wales.

The story of health and wellness amongst the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller communities in Wales is one that has developed over the period March to September 2020, from being one where the infection rates were minimal and protection measures successful, to one where the communities are now vulnerable and at risk with climbing infection rates and numbers of fatalities on sites throughout the country. The reasons for this dramatic change and deepening of the crisis will be explored in the context of the report, but the shift from clear, comprehensive guidance with simple but effective measures to contain the pandemic, to confusing and incomprehensible (to the majority of the individuals in each community) guidance, lacking consistency across city and county boundaries, has been at the root of the growing problem. In common with a great many people in Wales (and across the U.K.) the easing of restrictions in July 2020 gave a false picture of security and safety, leading communities to relax the vigilance they had previously displayed, to their detriment.

In health and wellness terms, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic upon Welsh Romani and Traveller populations is increasingly negative. Furthermore, the return of Romani and Traveller children to school, whilst addressing the inconsistent educational support provided to these pupils during the restrictions of March to July (see below), also introduced the novel coronavirus into the communities and sites, via transmission from youngsters to the wider community. The extent of restrictions has steadily increased in the period July to October 2020, with a complete national ‘lock-down’ re-imposed again from Friday 23rd October⁸ as infection rates rise to 2,500 cases each day; the prospect of an extended winter ‘lock-down’ and its impact upon the Romani and Traveller

communities in Wales is alarming. The wider U.K. debate regarding a re-imposed national 'lock-down', which was being resisted by the Prime Minister in Westminster, but has now been re-imposed for at least one month, indicates the extent of fears of a huge second wave of the novel coronavirus and COVID-19 sweeping across the United Kingdom, similarly to the pattern of previous historical 'flu pandemics'⁹.

The economic impact of the continuing restrictions has been and remains disproportional in its impact upon the Romani and Traveller populations of Wales. All those who rely upon mobility as an essential aspect of their economic operations (*not* just Travellers), have been and remain adversely effected and those whose work is primarily based upon interaction with their customers severely limited by the low numbers of people allowed to gather together at one time. Hospitality and entertainment sectors are the most obvious examples of these aspects of the economy, but the associated effects of these restrictions on personal and professional movement and interaction, in terms of significant portions of the service sector, need to be recognised in assessing the impact of the pandemic upon the Romani and Traveller communities. Everything from roofing, tarmac laying and landscape gardening to fortune-telling relies, to a greater or lesser extent, upon the personal interaction between the vendor and the customer. Selling rugs and carpets door-to-door requires not only the freedom to move from location to location with the goods for sale, but the doorstep interaction with potential buyers; extended transactions in this situation are extremely difficult, even if potential buyers open the front door at all. Crossing the boundaries of counties and cities, with differing degrees of restrictions post-July, in local and regional quarantines, has also added to the economic challenges faced by Romani and Traveller business people, as it is confusing as to what one can and cannot do where. This report will consider the economic factors and draw attention to the impact of the pandemic upon the Romani and Traveller economies as paramount.

The political situation in Wales has seen a broad consensus by government and opposition over the measures taken to restrict the transmission of the virus and COVID-19 disease at the outset of the pandemic, with that consensus breaking down along political lines as the measures have continued or following the re-imposition for at least two weeks (and possibly longer). The governing political party has attempted to define measures in a way that often contrasts with the Westminster government, such as imposing travel bans on differing destinations in specific instances, with increasingly limited success¹⁰. The limited autonomy that the devolved governments have in the U.K. has been most articulated to draw attention to the measures undertaken by each, with tacit reinforcement of the notion of regional governments being 'fairer' in their care for their own constituencies. This follows the pattern set by on-going health and wellness, economic and education assessments of provision, availability of services and outcomes of previous years, by the Equalities and Human Rights Commissions¹¹. Romani and Traveller populations in the U.K. are always featured in these equalities reports, particularly in the sections related to health and wellness and education. Assessments since 2010 consistently show little change in terms of poor outcomes for these communities. There is every reason to suppose that these outcomes will have fallen further behind, disproportionately (in relation to the majority population) impacting the Romani and Traveller communities the hardest (though least acknowledged), in terms of economy, education, social isolation and exclusion, mental health and social cohesion. Whilst it is clear that Black and Minority Ethnic communities heavily employed in the health and senior care services have suffered the greatest number of fatalities and infections¹²; the overall figure hides greater differentiation within the BAME communities (amongst which Gypsies, Roma, Travellers are included), which must be taken into account in any assessment¹³. This report will attempt to draw out these differentiations, though statistical evidence for these subtle differences is scant for Wales at the present time.

Finally, the report will address the question of what strategies may be implemented to improve the underlying health and wellness of Romani and Traveller communities and strengthen resilience, resistance and recovery in the longer term, in terms of future pandemics. What measures can be taken to raise awareness and improve public health information delivery to these populations? Which economic instruments might be put in place to reduce economic exclusion and social segregation, strengthening social cohesion and inter-communal relations (such as micro-credit business loans, used successfully in other countries)? This brief report will also attempt to begin to address at least some of these points, providing a starting point for future, in-depth studies.

Methodology

A series of survey questionnaires (see **Appendices**) were designed and sent out to three groups, as part of gathering evidence for this report. Each questionnaire used up to twenty-four questions to ascertain the extent of support or intervention that local authorities (LA) or police services (PS) in Wales had experienced, with regard to Romani and Traveller communities during the restrictions of March to September 2020. The groups surveyed were:

- i. The Welsh local authorities
- ii. The police forces in Wales
- iii. The national government of Wales
- iv. Romani and Traveller communities in Wales, through individuals and representatives

In addition, a few interviews were carried out in an attempt to garner more specific information about particular aspects of the impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic, such as personal protection measures, impact upon work and business and health and wellness.

The questionnaires were based upon the government guidance provided in late March and early April 2020, by both the Westminster and *Senedd* governments¹⁴, regarding measures introduced to mitigate the impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic upon Gypsy and Traveller populations specifically. Such guidance was issued, via ministerial letters, following requests for clarification from Traveller organisations in England¹⁵. Further guidance and action has been sought through the Wales Race Equality Forum meetings, coordinated by the Chief Whip's office and the Speaker of the *Senedd*, Jane Hutt AM¹⁶.

The desktop research was undertaken during August and September 2020, in circumstances where information, guidance and health advice was (and still is) constantly changing. Daily updates from the Westminster government and Prime Minister detail the shifting situation, the increasing concern and urgency as the number of cases and fatalities increase to levels similar to March and April 2020. In Wales in particular, areas of the country have the highest infection rates in the U.K. and most of the counties face 'lock-down' conditions very like those of seven months ago, with only the central, sparsely populated and mountainous regions *not* facing severe restrictions in movement and congregation. The desktop research has been extremely difficult to effectively quantify due to the fluctuations and reversal in information, data and the rapid changes in the severity of the pandemic.

Analysis of the data extracted from the surveys of the twenty-two unitary authorities (LA) in Wales¹⁷, the four police services, the national government in Wales and the Romani and Traveller communities of the country, was carried out using a rubric designed by the researcher during April to May 2020. Surveys were sent out to LA's and PS' during May and June, with reminders for responses sent the following month; despite these, some LA's have not responded to date, demonstrating perhaps that council personnel are not able to operate effectively during the current pandemic. Interviews that were carried out were done using the same rubric, or parts thereof, for specific topics. All data were correlated to provide a 'snapshot' of the subject during September 2020.

Literature and sources

The primary source materials have been national and local newspapers, government guidance (letters from ministers and government circulars) and published data, LA's specific guidance and published concerns, and personal interviews, all using information communication technology (ICT), Internet search engines (DuckDuckGo, Google), online newspaper archives and government World Wide Web pages. Individual interviews provided details about broader trends and topics that had appeared in the other sources or from the survey questionnaires, allowing the researcher to 'drill-down' into the subject a little further. Romani and Traveller organisations in the voluntary sector, called the "Third Sector" in Wales, provided another source of

information, particularly regarding demographics, social and economic structures of communities. The Romani Cultural & Arts Company, commissioner of the report, was regularly consulted and active in the securing of the data from the surveys.

The literatures surveyed for this report are what might be called 'the standard' works for Gypsies and Travellers in the U.K. and Roma in Europe (see Bibliography) and other, more specialist items as they relate to aspects of the study. In addition, data was drawn from the RCAC's previous reports regarding the health and wellness of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities in Wales, the Roma in Wales, a letter to ministers in Wales regarding the situation of Romani and Traveller communities in the country during the coronavirus pandemic, and briefings from the Wales Race Forum (WRF), Public Health Wales (PBW) and the Minister for Health.

Gypsy, Roma, Travellers in Wales: demographics, origins and languages

Figures for the Romani and Traveller communities in Wales, as in much of Europe, are notoriously unreliable with census data being of little practical use, as few Romani or Traveller people choose to officially register or respond to official (or unofficial) population surveys. The reasons for this are largely related to fear of persecution and discrimination from state authorities; the example of the *Porrajmos* or 'Great Devouring', the Romani term for the mass murder and destruction of Roma and Sinti that took place across Nazi occupied Europe (and in countries allied to the Nazi racial state) from 1936 to 1945¹⁸. Many across Europe Romani people feel very unhappy about supplying personal data to any representative of the state under any circumstances; in Sweden, for example, ethnic data is not collected precisely because Romani, Traveller and Jewish communities are extremely nervous about such statistical exercises providing data that may be used against them in the future.

In these circumstances, the knowledge about the numbers of people that are Romani and Traveller in Wales remains disputed, with LA's and national government relying upon the bi-annual caravan count to provide an estimate of population. This, of course, leaves aside any Travellers dwelling in houses as a result of settling for reasons of access to health services or education for their children and completely excludes the large numbers of Eastern European Roma that have migrated to Wales since the 1990's. This group is predominantly from eastern Slovakia where they face extreme poverty, emiseration and exclusion, combined with frequent violence from neo-Nazi and fascist groups currently active in the country¹⁹. The best estimates regarding the Welsh population of Gypsies, Roma, Travellers is from the Third Sector organisations that work most closely with these communities. They suggest that a reasonable national figure is approximately 3,000 Roma of East European heritage living in poor quality accommodation (but often internationally mobile); approximately 6,684 Gypsies and Travellers are living in trailers and caravans²⁰. The number of Gypsies and Travellers who are housed in order to access health and wellness services or education provision, or descended from mobile Travellers but maintaining their identity, is a phenomenon that is almost entirely ignored by government and local authorities (and under-researched by academics in Wales), but a rough estimate from the intra-communal knowledge of the RCAC is at least two-thirds of the total, or 4,456; all three groups amount to approximately 14,140 in total. The population of Wales (2016) is 3,113,000 of which Romani and Travellers make up approximately 0.45%.

Historically, the Welsh Romani population has been identified in the sources as arriving in the 1530's from Tudor England, with a second influx of Gypsy musicians and storytellers in the 18th century identified with the region around Bala and the family of Abram Wood (died 1799). Travellers from Ireland are descended from a much earlier migration of 'the Walking People' in the 4th century to the western regions and the establishment of the Irish Kingdom of Dyfed (360 CE to 410CE). The rise of the Welsh princedoms following the fall of Roman Britain saw continued migration of Irish people, including the Walking People, into western Wales until the Norman Conquest and invasion (1068 CE – 1100 CE). Further significant Irish Traveller influx took place through the 19th century, despite prohibitions against sea captains landing Irish migrants in Welsh ports, including Travellers (or *Tinkers*, as they are referred to in the sources). In the 20th century, migration of

numbers of eastern European Roma, primarily from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, has been seen from the middle of the 1990's onwards until the advent of Brexit, when migration has slowed considerably. Roma from Hungary, Bulgaria, Serbia and Rumania have also arrived in south Wales in much smaller numbers during the same period. In the 1950's, the improving economy of England and Wales attracted many Irish migrants to Britain, including Travellers who have remained in Wales, though seasonal mobility across the Irish Sea from the ports of Hollyhead and Pembroke Dock, continues to be an important aspect of Irish Traveller's social and cultural connections with the homeland. During the later decades of the century, the important community of Romani language speakers associated with the region around Bala has fallen into decline, with Romani linguistic competence overall across Wales.

The national project of reviving the Welsh language has dominated language policy of the Welsh government for decades and few resources have been allocated to support any other minority language in the country, including *Rromani-chib* or *poggadi-chib* (Anglo–Romani). Distinctions amongst the Romani community in Wales have been largely elided by the impact of government policy and broadcasting, with *Romanichals* in the south and west of the country becoming indistinct from *Kalé* in the north, despite being quite clearly identified by the work of John Sampson²¹ and later linguists, into the 1950's²². Linguistically²³, the Slovak and Rumanian Roma are primarily speakers of *Vlachi* dialects, the Serbian Roma *Gburbeti*, and the Hungarian Roma *Romungro*²⁴. Language policy towards translation of materials concerned with public health education, into *Rromani-chib* would both provide an impetus for communities to engage with important information, promote the use of Romani language amongst the newer *and* long-standing Romani communities, and provide a visible commitment to inclusivity and diversity. In short, the communities of Gypsies, Roma, Travellers in Wales have become more diverse and variegated in the last four decades than ever before and are likely to remain so, even with the restricted migration of a post–Brexit Wales. The impact of the Gypsy churches in Wales, bringing together Travellers, Gypsies and Roma are likely to promote further the building of cooperation and collaboration between communities, to say nothing of promoting literacy and the use of Romani, as a language of liturgy in the evangelical and Pentecostal churches amongst the communities²⁵.

Reporting the pandemic

The earliest reports of the novel coronavirus spreading in the U.K. were initially in early February 2020, with all cases before that identified in Wuhan, China; however, a reassessment of this picture has subsequently emerged²⁶ and it is likely that cases in the U.K. were present from late 2019, with a surge of cases coming in following the February half-term holiday and families returning from areas where the coronavirus had already established a hold (northern Italy). The WHO received notice from the Chinese government that the earliest cases were identified in early December 2019; however, reports²⁷ in March 2020 show that the virus, designated as SARS-COV-2, was identified in mid-November 2019. Human-to-human transmission was only acknowledged by the Chinese government on 21st January 2020, yet had clearly been the case from late November 2019. The rapid spread of the coronavirus in the U.K. from mid-February onwards was, it seems, facilitated by the return to school of children who were carriers of the disease, the asymptomatic nature of many of those infected who felt ill but did not present with the published symptoms of COVID-19 (possibly as low as 30% of those infected)²⁸, and the apparent stability of infection rates in the early stages of the pandemic. Measures to restrict the spread of infection were slow to be put in place by the Westminster government, with 'lock-down' only coming into force six weeks²⁹ after the rapid rise in cases began to be identified in mid-February. It was clear that a shift in government thinking had happened earlier, though not been acted upon, with the reported steps to the banning of mass gatherings taking place in mid-March, the advice from the SAGE (Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies) encouraging ministers to impose much more stringent measures on 16th March and again 18th March, ministers advising the population to restrict unnecessary social interaction at the same time, and the definitive statement from the Prime Minister on 23rd March 2020, finally imposing 'lock-down'.

The second-wave of infections following the summer has again risen to alarming levels in the autumn and the approach of a combination of annual 'flu epidemic, pneumonia and a resurgent novel coronavirus pandemic through the winter of 2020 – 2021, likely following earlier patterns of pandemics in human history, means that this report will only reflect initial impacts and outcomes upon the Romani and Traveller communities. The true impact of the coronavirus pandemic upon the communities will be something that can only be assessed following a real end to the disease, with the development of a vaccine and the build-up of resistance amongst the general population, including Gypsies, Roma, Travellers. All **recommendations** (see the end of the report) are in the nature of provisional, given the likely continuance of the pandemic for at least two years further.

The impact of the 2019 novel coronavirus in the U.K. and its associated disease, COVID-19, upon the Romani and Traveller communities has been the subject of a number of news reports³⁰ and individual 'blog' pieces³¹ that have concentrated upon the plight of Romani and Traveller communities, during the coronavirus pandemic. Other news reports have chosen to reinforce existing prejudices and stereotyping in the populist press, delivering stories that promote the idea of Gypsies and Travellers as refusing to abide by guidelines and restrictions, deliberately ignoring medical advice and health experts' warnings about transmission of the virus and contagion within the community and beyond³². The government guidelines for local authorities (see *Appendices*, letter from Stephen Greenhalgh), issued during the early period of the crisis across the U.K., have also been used as a means of further demonising the communities through presenting these as a form of 'special treatment' to which Romani and Traveller people are not entitled³³. Overall, the particulars of the impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic have been hard to assess, as there have been no preliminary evaluations of this impact that are currently publicly available, in the fields of health and wellness, work and business, social cohesion or arts and culture as related to Gypsy, Roma, Traveller populations in the U.K.³⁴

Regardless of the availability of such news information, the actual reportage of exactly how the current pandemic has impacted upon the delivery of emergency services, planned measures, implementing guidelines and the results of those measures, in actual data, has been lacking in Wales. There are no clear figures of numbers of Romani or Traveller people who have been admitted to hospital with suspected or actual cases of COVID-19 on sites and in homes, nor have there been any reliable data regarding numbers of cases amongst the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller communities, related to coronavirus infection and the development of COVID-19³⁵. Reports of difficulties experienced by Romani and Traveller peoples living on sites or by the roadside (such as those featured in some of the news reporting), whether managed by the local authorities or privately owned sites, have not been confirmed by actual data regarding the numbers of families in difficulty, or the extent of these difficulties in accessing services and resources. Actual incidences of Romani or Traveller families threatened with eviction from a temporary stopping place, or the 'closure' of temporary Traveller sites by the erection of barriers across entrances to those sites remain anecdotal, with no evidence of their occurrence beyond assertions that they have happened. Again, the issue of trust between Travellers and the sedentary community is at the heart of any attempt to gather such data; without researchers from within the communities themselves, such information is always highly speculative.

Similarly, the actual situation on many sites, whether temporary or permanent are hard to discern from anecdotes and unsubstantiated reports of conditions and measures taken by communities themselves to protect families and neighbours, such as the use of facemasks and protective gloves, visors and hand-washing regimes (though reportedly, these have been stringently observed during the period of strictest 'lock-down'). It has been suggested by one interview participant that Gypsies and Travellers on sites organised closures and restrictions of visitors themselves, as a measure to stop the transmission of coronavirus to the local community from others, but again no details as to which sites this occurred on have been available, rendering this 'hearsay' and 'second-hand'. As it stands at present, there is little first-hand or direct, individual interviews with members of the Romani or Traveller communities in Wales, on the conditions or reportage from sites or temporary roadside encampments³⁶. Public Health Wales has sent teams onto Gypsy and Traveller sites in late September, as concern grows within and without these communities, with testing kits and health advice given

directly by PHW staff. Some sites have also seen infections and illness increase, following children's return to schools and restrictions easing in July 2020. A few photographs from one particular intervention in Wales shows the PHW staff, dressed in full Personal Protective Equipment (white coveralls, masks and clear visors), carrying out such tests and assessments. However, this set of photographs clearly demonstrates that such active engagement with the spread of the novel coronavirus on Traveller sites has only begun very recently³⁷.

There are reasons that this lack of data also stems from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic itself, further complicating the effective evaluation of the impact upon Romani and Traveller people (discussed above). Reportage has been constrained to indirect, representational interviews with members of, or from, Romani and Traveller communities and organisations; generalised assessments of impact and evaluation of the effects, but no actual data regarding this issue. To establish a reliable baseline for assessing the impact of the pandemic, it is essential that such data is gathered directly by and from the communities themselves, following the model previously developed and successfully implemented by the RCAC as part of its health and wellness survey³⁸ of Romani and Traveller health in Wales. Until such an exercise is carried out, the assessment of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic remains generalised and conditional, in most instances.

What has emerged in these communities is a reluctance to report cases of illness and infection for fear of being targeted as spreaders of disease, as happened historically to both Jewish and Romani communities across Europe in recent times. Indeed, Roma communities in Eastern Europe, in Rumania to be specific, have been targeted in exactly these ways and the occasions of Roma funerals have seen violence erupt between mourners and skinheads who have assaulted them in Bihor County³⁹ in June. The motivation for this attack (and others reportedly) has been accusations that Roma are spreading disease by their activities and lifestyle. In this context, the *Daily Mail's* reports of Travellers attending a joint funeral⁴⁰ are clear (and not particularly subtle) in their implication of something similar. In the wake of the easing of restrictions, it is clear that infections and fatalities amongst the Romani and Traveller communities have risen beyond the minimal levels that they were at between April and June 2020.

The primary source for information regarding the situation in the communities has been the communities themselves, sharing with individuals and organisations that they trust, such as RCAC. These details and the contrast with the 'official view'⁴¹, drawing upon the survey responses, are part of the challenge of understanding the actual impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the Romani and Traveller communities over a short period of six or seven months. From the data provided by the survey questionnaires, little has been requested of the local authorities, in terms of assistance for roadside families in the twenty-two statutory local authorities, and few families have actually been stopped 'on the road' by the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic in February 2020 (possibly earlier, according to reports in the U.K. press⁴²) and its rapid spread through the population during February and March (see above for a brief chronology). This is likely for reasons both historical and practical in origin.

Historically, the date for 'turning out' or 'going on the road' is the old Julian calendar St George's Day on the 23rd April (still observed in many traditional communities in south-eastern Europe and Turkey as *Hudirlez* or *Ederlezi*⁴³), has for centuries been the date when Romani and Travellers who maintained a commercially nomadic existence left winter sites or stopping places to pursue economic opportunities. With the calendar reform of 1750⁴⁴, the dates for many seasonal celebrations and saints' days effectively shifted by eleven days, separating the Orthodox, Jacobite, Armenian and Nestorian liturgical calendar date of St George's Day to 5th May from the Gregorian Catholic and Protestant calendar which maintained the date of 23rd April. Practically, Easter has been another 'movable feast' that marked the beginning of the travelling year for Show-people and Circus Folk, when it coincided with clement weather; this year Easter fell upon 12th April 2020. However, the most severe restrictions had already been put in place at the end of March and weather had been extremely unsettled and chancy through the month, meaning most families and businesses had not begun their annual peregrinations. Very few families were 'on the road' or travelling in March in Wales, leading to little demand for services and support for roadside encampments from local authorities that reported them (see below).

Similarly, reporting of evictions during the period of most stringent 'lock-down' was low, with three carried out (two evictions in Merthyr Tydfil, one in Flintshire) and two negotiated stopping places in Merthyr Tydfil. Temporary encampments were reported by a number of LA's (Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire, Powys, Monmouthshire, Newport, Flintshire, Wrexham, Cyngor, Vale of Glamorgan, Merthyr Tydfil), with three providing additional space for temporary encampments during 'lock-down' (Merthyr Tydfil, Flintshire, Monmouthshire). Toilets, waste collection and water bowsers were supplied by some LA's (Carmarthenshire, Powys, Vale of Glamorgan, Wrexham, Newport). In other cases, the encampments were either supplied by the landowner or were very short-term and Travellers did not request additional services or support.

In general, all LA's that replied have responded to Gypsy and Traveller communities in their areas as 'vulnerable', according to our survey and supported them as such. Several reported supporting vulnerable Romani and Traveller families through the crisis, providing a variety of materials and advice around protection, education and health care.

Advice, guidance and information

The available public health information and guidance issued by national government and local authorities have also been made widely available, through online distribution and constitutes another source of information regarding the impact of novel coronavirus and COVID-19 upon the Romani and Traveller communities, albeit through the prism of emergency actions and plans to deal with the crisis. Such guidance relies upon a ministerial letter from the Westminster government issued at the end of March 2020, further enhanced by the statements from the Welsh government, particularly the Health Minister and the Chief Whip⁴⁵. Other public bodies, such as Public Health Wales (PHW), have also issued guidance based upon both the Westminster government advice and that of the *Senedd*⁴⁶, during the period of government imposed restrictions, safety measures and constraints known collectively as 'lock-down'⁴⁷. There are areas where this information and guidance has failed to reach the Gypsy and Traveller communities, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

The question of access to information and advice, for the Romani and Traveller communities, has a hidden a little acknowledged bias, in that the 'digital divide' between Gypsies and Travellers and the other communities is significant. The concept of a gap between those in possession of the necessary technology to access the growing World Wide Web via the Internet (as invented and envisaged by Tim Berners-Smith), was first raised in regard to communities during discussions regarding inner city regeneration under the Labour government of the late 1990's. The *New Deal for Communities* programme sought to inject many millions into neglected and disadvantaged inner city areas and populations living in those neighbourhoods and boroughs through a variety of projects that dealt with the environment, education, local business, recycling, housing, technology and early childhood development. In only one instance in England and Wales was a project aimed at closing the gap in access to information communication technology (ICT) and Romani or Traveller communities; the Haringey Traveller Education Support Service worked in partnership with Gladesmore Community School ICT Centre, as part of their 'Reaching the Roma' programme to support Czech and Slovak Roma coming into the borough in large numbers in the late 1990's and early 2000's, accessing local schools, supporting learning and raising attainment, particularly amongst girls and young women. The project was highly successful in achieving its aims and objectives, but did not have an impact outside of the local borough (though some of the project staff went on to become academics and advocates in the wider world of Romani and Traveller empowerment).

In more general terms, the divide between Romani and Traveller communities and others in the digital arena has grown, rather than decreased proportionally. In the early 2000's, the disparities in terms of access to ICT were relatively small, with only dial-up Internet access outside of government and institutions (such as universities, research institutes and the schools), technology businesses and a small online shopping sector. Mobile Internet access was largely limited to WAP enabled mobile telephones and extremely expensive to use and consumer WiFi was still limited to dial-up modem connections and speeds. The average Internet user in the UK was likely to be in the south-east or major urban conurbations and there were clearly divides between

richer and poorer, rural and urban, majority and minority ethnic communities. Romani and Traveller people were amongst the least able to access the Internet or use the World Wide Web, alongside a large proportion of the population of the country. Through the 2000's the Welsh government sought to close the gap between the country as a whole and the rest of the UK in terms of this digital divide and made significant progress by 2010.

In the decade since, the widespread use of 'smartphones' and mobile computing devices has seen an exponential increase in broadband and WiFi access across the U.K. With more and more information and entertainment pushed to search, social and streaming services, the so-called FAANG group (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google) has come to dominate the Internet and World Wide Web in particular directions and developments. Arguably, there has been a democratisation of the Internet from its origins as a virtual environment inhabited primarily by scientists, the military, researchers, academics and elites drawn from the wealthier European and North American continents, to one that is truly global and unrestricted in terms of class and social status. Equally, it is claimed that there has been a wholesale commercialisation and commodification of the Internet and World Wide Web to the detriment of knowledge and learning, with the spread of misinformation and propaganda, such debates fall outside of the remit of this report.

What is clear is that there are significant groups and populations that have remained outside the realm of access to the Internet to a very great extent, for a wide variety of reasons, including the Romani and Traveller communities, without benefiting from the improvement in accessing knowledge and information nor the associated raising of literacy rates, often claimed as a by-product of increasing access to the Internet. Romani and Traveller communities still have the lowest use of ICT in general terms and the lowest number of individuals who pursue careers connected to ICT, web-development, coding and programming, systems analysis or administration (in common with other nomadic and itinerant communities). Few Romani or Traveller communities have access to desktop or laptop computers, outside of those children who regularly attend schools with such facilities (and there is some evidence that even if they do have access in schools, they are reluctant to use ICT as an unfamiliar medium). When the idea of ICT and Internet use has become commonplace amongst much of the Welsh population (though a digital divide still exists between rural and urban communities), Gypsies and Travellers remain 'left behind'. In this case, the availability of information to Romani and Traveller communities was restricted or unintelligible (through being in Welsh and English), though PHW and the Welsh government made subsequent translations of important guidance and health advice.

The 'digital divide' has ensured that much of the crucial information about the coronavirus pandemic, its spread, its symptoms and seeking medical attention and treatment were not delivered to communities. Co-optation of Third Sector organisations to distribute public health and government information through their own networks was attempted, but without initially offering support to carry this out, thereby adding pressure to already stretched resources and personnel. The production of safety videos for the Gypsy and Traveller communities was suggested by one police service, concerning funerals and attending them, but again, the expectation was that Romani and Traveller organisations would be able to produce these themselves (and significantly, *only* the Gypsy and Traveller communities were approached in this regard). Clearly communication through the visual medium would have been more effective and successful in accessing 'hard-to-reach' communities such as Romani and Travellers; however, communications strategies in local and national authorities and institutions need to take these into account and improve their methods of reaching out. It is important to ensure thinking beyond the widely accepted 'norm' and not assume that everyone in Wales has access to, or the ability to effectively use, the Internet and World Wide Web when considering the delivery of essential health information.

In the period since June 2020, the stringent restrictions of 'lock-down' have been loosened then tightened again, as numbers of infections and fatalities once again rose and the clarity of advice and guidance declined. Early on, in April, Gypsy and Traveller sites in Wales had adopted measures that seemed wise to the residents; whole sites were closed to all visitors, entrance ways blocked to all but essential and emergency vehicles; families limited themselves to shopping to one day each week; cleanliness codes, already part-and-parcel of

Romani culture, were stringently observed to protect the communities. Historically, Romani pollution taboos were part of the heritage of Anatolian civilisations, Byzantine and Ottoman, that both defined the Romani from the non-Romani population, and functioned as health practices to limit the spread of illness and disease from *gorgios* (non-Romani) to Romani. Such practices, similar to those of orthodox Jewish and Muslim communities, still remain in place in the majority of Romani and Traveller groups and these have served them well during the pandemics that have swept over human populations during the 19th and 20th centuries, limiting the impact, on Gypsy and Travellers of the 1889 Russian 'flu pandemic; 1918 Spanish 'flu pandemic; the 1957 Asian 'flu pandemic; the 1968 Hong Kong 'flu pandemic, and the 2009 swine 'flu pandemic.

Unfortunately, the increasing interaction between Romani and *gorgio* in the weeks following July easing of restrictions, has broken down the *cordon sanitaire* and introduced the coronavirus into the Gypsy and Traveller populations, most likely through the return of Romani and Traveller children to schools. The failure of majority populations to effectively follow the guidelines for continuing social distancing and adopting face coverings has also had a dramatic impact upon the spread of the pandemic in the post-July to September period. The intervention, in recent weeks, of PHW on Gypsy and Traveller sites, to carry out testing and tracing exercises as well as bring treatment to 'hard-to-reach' and excluded communities, indicates the speed and ferocity with which the coronavirus has spread amongst previously very-low risk populations. By maintaining quarantine previously, the Gypsy and Traveller population has built up no communal resistance to the disease and is more vulnerable as a result.

Education, support and the Romani and Traveller population

Part of the strategy for dealing with long-term absence from schools in Wales has been to provide online tutoring and teaching to Welsh school children, equipping those that need them with laptops, tablet computers and broadband connection 'dongles' so that they may reach lessons and teaching on the World Wide Web and through online video conferencing. This programme was unevenly implemented, with children from the Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities receiving no technical support or hardware until *after* the more stringent 'lock-down' had finished (early July 2020). The issue was raised by the RCAC at the *Wales Race Forum* in May, in an official letter requesting action, before any hardware was provided to BAME children. During the period April to June, local Traveller Education Support Services (TESS) or Ethnic Minority Achievement Teams did not contact Romani and Traveller children in Wales, with regard to their education needs during the coronavirus pandemic. Distance learning materials were not provided, nor were there online support sessions arranged for Traveller children to ensure that their education needs were being assessed and met. Upon the re-opening of schools in Wales, one TESS advised Traveller parents not send their children back to school, if they were concerned at all about transmission of the coronavirus between youngsters and their families. As a consequence, many parents took the advice and did not send their children, though no alternative was provided to continue their access to education.

As the initial release from restrictions was implemented, the guidance and information has become less clear and comprehensible to Romani and Traveller families, with widespread confusion resulting. School classes have returned in most year groups, only to be sent home to isolation if one of the children, or a member of a child's family has been tested positive for coronavirus and COVID-19. In short, the impact upon Romani and Traveller children's learning has been wholly disastrous, leaving these children even further 'behind' the majority population in terms of educational outcomes.

Economic Support due to the impact of Coronavirus

The basis of economic protection measures constitutes a particular aspect of the government in Wales' various approaches to address the very difficult situation that many people have found themselves in during the 'lock-down'. The latest Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) has found low pay, unaffordable housing and a lack of childcare is trapping 700,000 people in poverty, including 180,000 children (including Romani and

Traveller children), as a direct result of the coronavirus pandemic. Insofar as it pertains to the Romani and Traveller communities in the country, the measures to support the self-employed, small business owners and what has been described as the 'gig economy' of musicians, entertainers and performers, are the most relevant. It is in this sector that most Romani and Traveller people work (and have always worked), occupationally belonging to the self-employed and running their own small businesses and concerns, including as entertainers and performers. Guidance for the self-employed to claim a grant for support was issued by the Westminster government in March 2020⁴⁸ as the *Self-employment Income Support Scheme*, though the scheme itself was not opened until mid-May 2020, leaving many confused about eligibility, but it appears that none of the information regarding the scheme was issued, through the voluntary sector organisations that represent Romani and Traveller communities, to the communities themselves and awareness regarding the scheme is almost completely absent⁴⁹. Thus, very few of those who may have been eligible to claim support from the scheme had the necessary knowledge or information to be able to do so, hampered by the 'digital divide', poor communication on the part of the Welsh government regarding the scheme, low educational outcomes amongst the community in terms of the necessary skills to locate or solicit the information needed and isolation from the wider networks of business and trade that would 'plug-in' Romani and Traveller traders and business people to these networks and fraternities.

The wider questions of how well the scheme to support the self-employed are also relevant here; the delays to implementation and the criteria for eligibility have been criticised by individuals from the communities who were able to access the information about the scheme. Based as it has been on a complex calculation of previous years' profits, the scheme would seem to undermine the very notion of individual entrepreneurship so emphasised by Conservative party ideology by making clear the fragility of the small business, self-employed economy and prioritising large companies and business conglomerates in terms of economic support, in the opinion of some Romani business people. However regarded, they have argued the provisions for easing the economic impact of loss of income have fallen most beneficially upon the larger, more resilient businesses who have been able to access large scale payments to furlough their workforces, at the expense of supporting the small business sector. The latest situation, with the second period of national 'lock-down' coming into force for at least two weeks, will further impact upon low-paid workers and small businesses, as the furlough scheme has ended and the newer *Job Support Scheme* is not yet in place, leaving Welsh workers and companies in an economic and financial 'gap' that is not yet being fully addressed by government in Cardiff.

In short, the support for mitigating the impact of the coronavirus pandemic upon the Romani and Traveller communities needs to recognise the particular *exceptionalism* of the Romani and Traveller economy, similarly to the recognition of those operating within the 'gig economy' or what has more accurately been called, the *precariate*, those working in precarious financial circumstances, vulnerable to even the smallest changes in economic conditions. The economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic has fallen unevenly and unequally upon the Romani and Traveller communities, operating as part of the 'precariate' in the 'gig' economy. Recognition of this as adversely affecting an entire ethnicity, rather than a section of the wider majority population *must* acknowledge the impact of structural, historical discrimination and racism, disproportionately *emiserating* an entire group, leaving them more vulnerable than they already were and ensuring that, economically, Romani and Traveller groups will be further economically excluded and marginalised for generations more.

This is the most important and long-lasting impact of the pandemic and one that will be negatively experienced by Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers for decades, if not centuries to come⁵⁰.

Recommendations

- Health mediators, as recommended in the RCAC's report about health and wellness in the Romani and Traveller communities in Wales, *need* to be recruited, trained and delivered to communities, following the successful models of Roma health mediators developed by the Open Society Foundations in many parts of Europe working with Roma populations;
- Lessons learned from the experience of the Third Sector organisations in supporting communities *must* be incorporated into strategies and 'action plans' developed by local and national government, rather than relying upon local authority officers and groups that have little practical accountability to the communities and superficial understanding of them, including as recognised and protected *ethnic groups* (ignoring the use of correct, *capitalised* terminology, for example). More generally, officers in local government and national administration *should* undertake periodic training in raising awareness about bias, racism and discrimination to address these gaps in knowledge;
- Better monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the pandemic upon the Romani and Traveller populations *should* be carried out over the entire duration of the crisis, by Romani and Traveller voluntary organisations that have the trust and strong relationships in place. Regular reporting of the impact and any initiatives aimed at mitigating the negative impacts, *needs* to be in place and funding to carry out such a role *should* be set aside for this work;
- Funding *needs* to be assigned by all public bodies, including the police, that have a responsibility to communicate effectively with Gypsies, Roma, Travellers during the crisis; to support Third Sector organisations that *are* effectively working with communities; to ensure the proper dissemination of public health materials and government advice, guidance and enforcement regulations;
- Regular news and information bulletins *should* be delivered to communities by Welsh voluntary sector organisations, rather than non-Romani businesses operating in England with little or no direct contact with Welsh Romani and Traveller populations. Funding should be made available for this work, rather than paying contractors who are not within Wales and are unfamiliar with the communities;
- Public Health Wales must operate more closely and coherently with BAME community organisations, including Romani and Traveller organisations, to deliver better and more impactful information, advice and guidance. Alternative options for delivering this in culturally competent ways (such as reaching populations through working with churches, temples and mosques, women's organisations and community businesses) should be used;
- The economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic *has* to be addressed through targeted funding and micro-loans to regenerate the well being of the communities. Models that have been successfully used in Turkey, India and Malaysia provide examples of successful support, particularly for women and girls, with economic improvement paving the way for raising educational outcomes, positive changes in health and wellness, and sustainability of the communities;
- Education initiatives *must* be implemented to increase understanding of health issues, raise attainment, and improve achievement amongst Romani and Traveller populations, through development of a series of curriculum modules related to Romani culture, history, language and religious belief. Delivering education through diverse and flexible models of distance learning, including closing the digital divide to allow for online teaching and learning, should also be introduced, as alternatives for mass education with all the attendant problems of transmission of disease and rapidly increasing infection rates. Elective home education is already in place, but needs to be extended and sufficiently resourced to achieve real, measureable improvements;

Appendices

Local Authority Survey Questionnaire Template

Moving for Change Roadside Travellers Survey: Local Authorities	Yes / No	Notes and additional comments
Have there been any roadside evictions in this local authority, during the months March to June 2020?		
Have roadside encampments during this period been provided temporary with waste and water facilities, as suggested by government in March (see attached letter from Minister for Communities)?		
Has the local authority made alternative stopping places available, such as transit sites, suitable local authority land, and holiday campsites which may have closed and have established facilities available?		
Has the local authority been able to provide access for Gypsy and Traveller families who no longer have access to places they may have relied on for water and cleaning purposes?		

Moving for Change Roadside Travellers Survey: Local Authorities	Yes / No	Notes and additional comments
<p>Has the local authority taken measures to support vulnerable people, including vulnerable people of which Gypsy, Roma, Traveller, Bargee and Liveaboard Boaters, in line with government guidance?</p>		
<p>On 26th March 2020, government advice suggested that Local Authorities may conclude that some Gypsy and Traveller communities, especially those living on unauthorised sites and lacking basic amenities, require alternative places to stop where access to facilities such as water pipes and water bowsers and portable toilets is provided, or can be made temporarily available; has this device been followed in any cases?</p>		
<p>Has the local authority accessed any of the additional £3.2 million in targeted funding to local authorities to protect those living on unauthorised sites?</p>		

Moving for Change Roadside Travellers Survey: Local Authorities	Yes / No	Notes and additional comments
<p>Has the local authority been able to provide access to alternative refuse disposal following the closure of many recycling centres, which has also had an impact on the disposal of refuse for Gypsy and Traveller communities?</p>		
<p>Has any of the additional funding from the £500 million Hardship Fund been accessed, so that the local authority can provide council tax relief and other financial support to the most vulnerable people and households in their area, including Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller families?</p>		
<p>Have local authority Gypsy and Traveller liaison officers made contact with the families living on the roadside, to assess eligibility for support from any of the additional and targeted funding?</p>		
<p>Have local education managers and Traveller Education Support Services made contact with Gypsy and Traveller families living on the roadside, to register children for educational support during this period?</p>		

[COVID-19 – Gypsy, Traveller and Boater communities, 24th March 2020](#)

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 waterways[i][ii][iii]. 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 3,000 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 household⁵¹.

[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/>

[COVID-19 – Welsh Minister with responsibility for Equalities statement](#)

17 July 2020

Jane Hutt AS/MS

Deputy Minister and Chief Whip

Dear Colleagues,

Coronavirus has had a significant impact on all countries around the world and Wales. As well as the risks to health, the consequences are affecting every part of our society, including people and communities that were already vulnerable or disadvantaged.

The impact on the voluntary sector in Wales has been severe, including loss of income and activities being suspended. In spite of these challenges, the sector has responded superbly to the crisis, with many organisations adapting the services and support they provide to meet unprecedented needs in our communities. In addition, thousands of new volunteers have come forward, many of whom have indicated they want to continue supporting their neighbours and communities through recovery and beyond.

There are ongoing concerns about community safety and community cohesion, including in particular victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence. We are continuing to work closely with our partners to ensure our communities are safe and that victims and survivors receive support and advice as Covid-19 restrictions are eased.

As Minister with responsibility for Equality, I am very conscious that Covid-19 has had a disproportionate impact on some people, including women, BAME and disabled people. Over the past few months I have made it a priority to meet frequently with key stakeholders from these and other equality networks. Their advice has been crucial in helping us to identify and quickly address issues arising from the pandemic. I am very grateful for their support.

I also recognise that economic inequality is likely to widen during a recession, reinforcing the need for vigilance to ensure that we are mindful of the impacts of our decisions and policies on the most disadvantaged. In relation to this, I can confirm that the socio-economic Duty (Part 1 of the *Equality Act 2010*) will be commenced this *Senedd* term, coming into force on 31 March 2021. This will be a key mechanism in supporting the most vulnerable in our society and something which will be extremely important in our continued response to Covid-19. Further information about the Socio-economic Duty can be found on the Welsh Government website [here](#).

There can be no doubt that we face huge, unprecedented, challenges. As we plot a course to recovery and reconstruction, our commitment to social, economic and environmental justice is unchanged – including a commitment to protecting our most vulnerable communities. We will embed our obligations to those who follow us alongside those who are living through Covid19, under the *Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act*.

Our values remain the same, but we will need to be fearless and radical in applying to our established policies the lens of the new post-Covid realities. Many of the things that have worked in the past will no longer be fit for purpose. We will need to show flexibility and imagination in appraising our current approaches and in developing new ones. That is why as well as drawing on thinking from within the Government, we are also determined to look outside for challenge to our established ways of thinking and for fresh inspiration.

We are issuing an invitation to people in Wales to send us their thoughts on how we should support future post-Covid recovery and reconstruction in Wales. We have a dedicated email address – ourfuturewales@gov.wales – and would like to hear your thoughts on how we can shape our future Wales. We would like to hear from the people in Wales about what really matters, about where we should focus our efforts on recovery. We are asking people to do that by the end of July. That will be far from the end of this

crucial national conversation, but we want to help focus people's efforts in contributing to our understanding and thinking in these early stages.

Yours sincerely,

Jane Hutt AS/MS

Deputy Minister and Chief Whip

COVID-19 –MITIGATING IMPACTS ON GYPSY & TRAVELLER COMMUNITIES

Minister Stephen Greenhalgh
Minister of State
Ministry of Housing,
Communities and Local Government
Fry Building, 2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF
Tel: 0303 444 3672
Email: Stephen.greenhalgh@communities.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/mhclg
Dear colleagues,

COVID-19 –MITIGATING IMPACTS ON GYPSY & TRAVELLER COMMUNITIES

Thank you for your continued work in responding to the COVID-19 crisis. I know that you and your staff are going beyond the call of duty to support your communities. During this unprecedented time, Local Authorities have a responsibility to ensure all communities are supported to stop the spread of COVID-19 by following the advice given by Public Health England. This includes members of Gypsy and Traveller communities. Some Gypsies and Travellers are particularly vulnerable and have the potential to be disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, and some will already have been asked to shield for 12 weeks due to high risk underlying health conditions. Social-distancing or self-isolation may be particularly challenging for members of these communities due to often confined and communal households, and restricted living conditions on many sites. In addition, we know that some families lack basic amenities including running water, adequate sanitation, and refuse disposal facilities, all of which are essential to limit the spread of the virus and keep people safe. Many will no longer have access to places they may have relied on for water and cleaning purposes, due to closures of leisure centres, churches and petrol station toilets. The closure of many recycling centres has also had an impact on the disposal of refuse. It is for Local Authorities to determine how best to support vulnerable groups during this unprecedented period in line with their public health responsibilities. To enable compliance with COVID-19 public health guidance on hygiene requirements, access to basic facilities is essential. This might involve the provision of additional temporary water, sanitation and waste disposal facilities to those currently lacking access to these, or making alternative stopping places available, such as transit sites, suitable local authority land, and holiday campsites which may have closed and have established facilities. In support of this, Government has taken several steps, which may help address the needs of these communities:

- You will have seen the Local Government Association guidance on protecting vulnerable people during COVID-19 outbreak. This sets out in detail how you should be supporting your communities, including vulnerable people of which Gypsy, Roma, Traveller and Liveaboard Boaters are part.
- Colleagues in the NHS have written to General Practice reminding them of the importance of continuing to deliver appropriate care to their local population and the requirements on registration of patients, including those with no fixed address.
- Provisions for rough sleepers were set out in a letter from my colleague, Luke Hall, Minister for Rough Sleeping and Housing, to Local Leaders on 26 March 2020. Local Authorities may conclude that some Gypsy and Traveller communities, especially those living on unauthorised sites and lacking basic amenities, require alternative places to stop where access to facilities such as water pipes and water bowsers and portable toilets is provided, or can be made temporarily available.

- Where people live permanently in caravan parks or are staying in caravan parks while their primary residence is unavailable, they may continue to do so. Luke Hall wrote, on 27 March 2020 to caravan site owners and managers to keep the sites open to allow people to remain if they would otherwise be homeless.
- The Government has announced a package of financial measures to support public services, individuals and businesses affected by Covid-19. This includes an injection of £1.6 billion in new grant funding, and bringing forward an initial £1.8 billion grant for business rates reliefs measures; £3.2 million in targeted funding to local authorities to protect rough sleepers; and a £500 million Hardship Fund, so that local authorities can provide council tax relief and other financial support to the most vulnerable people and households in their area.

Friends Families and Travellers maintains a service directory of Gypsy and Traveller support organisations across the country, who may be able to help you engage with and understand the needs of Gypsies and Travellers in your area: <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/services-directory/>.

Thank you for your dedication in leading your communities during these difficult times.

STEPHEN GREENHALGH
MINISTER FOR COMMUNITIES

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¹ The terms, 'Romani' and 'Traveller' will be used in this document to include the widest possible communities of those who self-identify as *Gypsy, Roma, Traveller, Manouche, Sinti, Beyash, Gitano, Kaale, Kalé, Calo, Faron, Romanlar, Domlar, Lomlar, Romer, Tattare, Gens de Voyage, Tsiganes* or who prefer to describe themselves in terms of their traditional occupational group, such as *Kalderash, Lovari, Rudari, Ursari, Sepeçi, Kalaycı, Demirci*, or who prefer to use linguistic group designations, such as *Vlachi*. For an explanation of these terms and their origins, see the literature, particularly J. P. Liegeois (1992), Fraser (1994) and Hancock (2002)

² For example, "COVID-19 resources for supporting Gypsy, Traveller and Boater communities", www.gypsy-traveller.org; "What support is available for Gypsy, Roma, Traveller communities during the coronavirus pandemic?" <https://www.london.gov.uk/coronavirus/coronavirus-covid-19-faqs/what-support-available-gypsy-roma-and-traveller-community-during-coronavirus-pandemic>; "COVID-19 – The Traveller Movement", www.travellermovement.org.uk/covid19 The Welsh government's guidance and advice can be found at <https://gov.wales/guidance-those-supporting-gypsy-and-traveller-communities-covid-19-html?fbclid=IwAR2uIZ1yV7f8i4RfssA4dlBlxJHF28Xdor51GOQakg5T1p6Fgm5YzZSGivg> but fails to use capital 'G' or capital 'T' for Gypsies and Travellers, despite repeated requests and guidance from the Romani and Traveller Third Sector organisations

³ Voice over Internet Protocol and video conferencing have become dominant forms of communication during the coronavirus pandemic, particularly in business, during the period of the pandemic. In the context of the Romani and Traveller communities however, these technologies rely upon having access to fast, stable Internet connections and modern, internet-ready computers and smart 'phones. As we will see, the 'digital divide' between the Romani and Traveller communities and the average settled community is both great and, without significant investment and support in promoting internet literacy and digital accessibility, increasing with rapidity.

⁴ The Prime Minister has, in the last few days of September, reiterated the importance of taking more precautions and stronger measures after numbers of cases have increased and fatalities rise, following earlier relaxation of restrictions during the summer months; <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-54283980>; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-54242634>

⁵ See <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/coronavirus-wales-lockdown-covid-updates-19007975> for details of the late September situation in Neath Port Talbot, Torfaen and the Vale of Glamorgan, Cardiff, Swansea, Llanelli, Blaenauwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, Newport, and Rhondda Cynon Taff. Infection rates in Blaenauwent, where a large population of Romani and Traveller people are to be found, are 288 per 100,000 people, the highest in the U.K.

⁶ See <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-54598136> for details of the 'circuit-breaker lock-down' intended to halt the spread of novel coronavirus in Wales

⁷ See the details about the gap between Welsh government support for businesses and staff, and the Westminster government's new job support scheme coming online; <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-politics-54607893>

⁸ See <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-54566566> reporting the First Minister of the Senned likely to announce a national lock-down in Wales for at least two weeks

⁹ Spinney, Laura (2017), for a survey of the Spanish 'flu pandemic of 1918

¹⁰ See BBC News Wales, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-54772931>

¹¹ See the October 2018 Equalities and Human Rights Commission for Wales report, 'Is Wales Fairer?' as an example; the surveys were conducted in 2010, 2015 and 2018. See <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/wales-fairer-2018&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwi5rPPowIvsAhWUTxUIHYglCGEQFjAAegQICRAB&usq=AOvVaw1Z7NtdaffeZEpsmPOhkzvc>

¹² BAME communities make up 21% of the staff of the National Health Service in the U.K. overall and 15.5% of the fatalities, where ethnicity is recorded, due to coronavirus infections and COVID-19. The percentage of the overall population that is BAME is, according to the Office for National Statistics, is 15.4%, but adjusting for geographical location and age, the ONS found that fatalities amongst Black British people of African heritage are 3.7 times higher, amongst Black British people of Caribbean heritage 1.8 times higher and amongst British Asians 1.5 times higher than White British people; see <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52219070> Black women have been identified as being two times more likely to die as a result of COVID-19 infection than White women; see <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/first-ministers-bame-covid-19-advisory-group-report-of-the-socioeconomic-subgroup.pdf>

¹³ See the statement from the Minister for Health in Wales; <https://gov.wales/written-statement-covid-19-and-bame-communities>

¹⁴ The term is used similarly to 'Westminster' to mean the building and the Welsh government, the Assembly and its members in Cardiff. In Scotland, 'Holyrood' similarly refers to the government and buildings associated with the Scottish parliament, as does 'Stormont' in Northern Ireland.

¹⁵ FFT (Friends Families and Travellers) a national (England) charity that works with Gypsies, Roma, Travellers and those following a nomadic way of life, based in Brighton. The organisation is Traveller led and first approached Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care; Robert Jenrick, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government and Rebecca Pow, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 24th March 2020 (with other organisations; see here: <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/health/covid-19-uk-government-must-lay-out-clear-plan-to-support-gypsies-travellers-and-boaters/>) to seek clarification for Gypsies and Travellers, Canal Boat dwellers (Boaters) and New Travellers, following their first guidance issued 17th March; <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/health/covid-19-uk-government-must-lay-out-clear-plan-to-support-gypsies-travellers-and-boaters/>. The Westminster Government amended the 27th March directive to halt all evictions under Part 55 of the Civil Procedure Rules, to permit evictions of trespassers on private land and property, on 20th April. It is not clear if this was followed by Welsh LA's or not, though the evictions that took place in Flintshire suggest that it was in some areas.

¹⁶ See *Appendices* for letter from Jane Hutt, Minister with responsibility for Equalities

¹⁷ Cardiff City Council did not reply to repeated requests to respond to the survey.

¹⁸ Barsony, J. & Daroczi, A. [eds.], (2008), *Pharrajimos: the Fate of the Roma During the Holocaust*, New York, Amsterdam, Brussels: Idebate Press; Liegeois, Jean-Pierre (2005), *Gypsies, an illustrated history*, London: Saqi Books; Hancock, Ian F. (2002), *We Are the Romani People; Ames am e Rromane Dzene*, Hatfield & Paris: University of Hertfordshire Press & Centre de Recherches Tsiganes

¹⁹ There are also numbers of Roma from the Czech Republic who have been migrating to the U.K. since the 1990's, but these are actually of Slovak origins, as the Czech communities were decimated during the Nazi occupation of the Czech lands during the Second World War, particularly under the administration of Reinhard Heydrich and the Waffen SS; see Kenrick, D. & Puxon, G. (1995), *Gypsies Under the Swastika*, Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, Interface Collection

²⁰ The Wales GTAA (*Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment*), carried out every five years across Wales (2021 will be the next GTAA) revealed 1,114 caravans in total on sites, private sites and land owned by Travellers or unauthorised encampments. An average of 5.6 persons in each family results in the overall figure here, though it is likely to be an undercount of the actual mobile population. Those who live in bricks-and-mortar and maintain a partially mobile or commercially nomadic existence are not included in this assessment.

²¹ Sampson, John (1926), *The Dialect of the Gypsies of Wales*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

²² Price, Glanville (2000), *Languages in Great Britain and Ireland*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell

²³ See Matras, Yaron (2002), *Romani: A Linguistic Introduction*, Camb.: Cambridge University Press, pp.14-48; Turner, Ralph L. (1926), "The position of Romani in Indo-Aryan", *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, 3rd Series, No.5, pp.145-189; Turner, Ralph L. (1927), "The position of Romani in Indo-Aryan: a reply to Dr. John Sampson", *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, 3rd Series, No.6, pp.129-138

²⁴ Bakker, P. *et al.* [eds.] (2000), *What is the Romani Language?* Paris & Hatfield: Centre de Recherches Tsiganes & University of Hertfordshire Press

²⁵ Translations of the Synoptic Gospels into Romani are widely available as are translations of other holy books, such as the Qu'ran. Philadelphia Pentecostalism amongst the Romanies and Travellers is a rapidly growing phenomenon; see Marsh, A. & Thurfjell, D. (2012)

²⁶ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/01/spate-of-possible-uk-coronavirus-cases-from-2019-come-to-light>
Confirmed from personal experience by the author of this report, who travelled back to Istanbul from the U.K. in late December 2019, was diagnosed with 'non-specific viral pneumonia' at the Acıbadem Hospital near home in January after being unwell for some days, was admitted to hospital in February briefly and was subsequently unwell for three months, confirmed by post-infection testing. This disease is debilitating in the extreme, with lasting effects upon lung capacity and general well-being.

²⁷ The *South China Morning Post* reported in March that the earliest cases were identified 17th November 2019; see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/13/first-covid-19-case-happened-in-november-china-government-records-show-report>

²⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/28/covid-19-transmission-rate-stable-for-third-week-says-ons>

²⁹ The most frequently quoted date for 'lock-down' beginning is that of 23rd March 2020, when the Prime Minister issued a statement telling people they "must stay at home" and businesses must close. However, the Minister of Health, Matt Hancock has subsequently stated on 16th July that 'lock-down' began on 16th March, when he stated in parliament that "all unnecessary social contact should cease". This is at odds with repeated statements by the government, including Matt Hancock, that restrictions came into force on 23rd March, as previous warnings had been regarded as advice, not instruction. See <https://fullfact.org/health/coronavirus-lockdown-hancock-claim/>

³⁰ "Coronavirus: Gypsy, Roma, Travellers disproportionately affected", *BBC Wales*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-politics-53742653>; "The hidden impact of coronavirus on Gypsy, Roma, Travellers", *Medical Xpress*, <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-08-hidden-impact-coronavirus-gypsy-roma.html>; "The hidden impact of coronavirus on Gypsy, Roma, Travellers", *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/the-hidden-impact-of-coronavirus-on-gypsy-roma-travellers-141015>; "Appleby Horse Fair cancelled over coronavirus outbreak", *BBC Cumbria*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-cumbria-52034090>; "How gypsies [sic] and travellers [sic] are coping with 'stay at home' advice", *Metro*, <https://metro.co.uk/2020/03/31/gypsies-travellers-coping-stay-home-coronavirus-advice-12484929/>; "Europe's marginalized Roma people hit hard by coronavirus", *Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/11/europes-marginalised-roma-people-hit-hard-by-coronavirus>; "Coronavirus: 'Travellers struggling without power and water'", *BBC UK*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52556488>;

³¹ See Helen Jones, Director of Leeds Gypsy and Traveller Exchange, www.sounddelivery.org.uk/2020/04/locked-down-or-locked-out-how-the-uks-gypsy-and-traveller-communities-are-coping-with-covid-19/
&sa=U&ved=2ahUKFwiY1aSM64PsAhXRDmMBHSxwD_AQFjAHegQIARAB&usq=AOvVaw2_Gil7YfEINe9DCvFqGFBm

³² "Travellers arrive in Appleby despite horse fair being cancelled for only second time in 250 years", *The Sun*, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11804827/travellers-arrive-appleby-horse-fair-despite-coronavirus-cancellation/>; "Travellers flout social distancing rules as crowds flock to gypsy [sic] funeral where they spent four hours with the coffin despite warning that only 15 mourners could attend ceremony", *Daily Mail*, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8297535/Travellers-flout-social-distancing-rules-crowds-flock-gypsy-funeral-despite-warnings.html>;

³³ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8336739/Travellers-pitch-west-London-moved-Covid-19-pandemic.html>

³⁴ This report is a first step in that process; however the report commissioned by the Welsh government from Professor Ogbona and his expert advisory group (see <https://gov.wales/complex-and-long-standing-disadvantages-exposed-coronavirus-pandemic-report-finds>) has delivered some detailed (although preliminary) findings in late June 2020 regarding the impact of coronavirus upon BAME communities in Wales. The second BAME Covid-19 Advisory sub-group, chaired by Professor Keshav Singhal, developed a two-stage risk-assessment, which was launched in the Welsh NHS and social care services, at the same time.

³⁵ The means of assessing the number of fatalities, by government has changed during the period of the crisis, with the figures originally being taken from the number of hospital deaths recorded where COVID-19 was mentioned as a factor in the patient's demise; then latterly being drawn from figures more generally collected but only where COVID-19 was deemed the cause of death within a 28 day period.

³⁶ Third Sector organisations that work with Romani and Traveller groups in Wales are in regular contact, offering advice and support to differing degrees; some have a contact number that can be called and messages left, others are in direct contact, often through family and relatives, with sites and communities. The role of the Gypsy churches in Wales has not been much discussed, but these are offering personal contact (within the guidelines) to support their members and others. The RCAC has a presence on social media, a weekly telephone conference call and individual calls to vulnerable members of the communities.

³⁷ In order to conform to legal requirements regarding protecting individuals' identity and anonymity, these photographs are not reproduced here in this report.

³⁸ The 2016 to 2017 project, 'Stories of Health & Wellness', supported by Public Health Wales' Centre for Equalities and Human Rights; <http://www.romaniarts.co.uk/stories-of-health-and-wellness-gypsy-roma-traveller-communities-in-wales-2/>

³⁹ p.c. Ioanida Costache, a Rumanian Roma working at ERIAC (European Roma Institute for Arts & Culture)

⁴⁰ *Daily Mail*, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8297535/Travellers-flout-social-distancing-rules-crowds-flock-gypsy-funeral-despite-warnings.html>;

⁴¹ The Grand Vezir (*Vezir-i Azam* in Turkish) Ahmet Tevfik Pasha (1845–1936) remarked at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 that regardless of the Allied view about the outcome of the First World War, it was the Ottoman "official view" that counted and he would not sign the punitive terms of the Treaty of Sevres; unfortunately, the notion that 'it is the official view that counts' has been used many times to refute actual fact since.

⁴² See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/01/spate-of-possible-uk-coronavirus-cases-from-2019-come-to-light>

⁴³ See Marushiakova, E. & Popov, V. (2007), "The vanished *kurban*. Modern dimensions of the celebration of *Kakava/Hidrellez* among the Gypsies in Eastern Thrace (Turkey)", in Sikimić, Biljana and Petko, Hristov [eds.], *Kurban in the Balkans*, Belgrade: Institute of Balkan Studies, pp.33-50

⁴⁴ The Calendar (New Style) Act of 1750 or Chesterfield Act achieved two significant changes with both the adoption of the Gregorian calendar for England and "its Dominions" and changed the legal year from beginning on Lady Day (25th March) to beginning on 1st January. The Act came into force in 1751 and caused a similar change in the tax year (as opposed to the financial year, which ends 31st March) so that this still begins 6th April, adding eleven days to that year.

⁴⁵ Health Minister Vaughan Gething and Chief Whip Jane Hutt have issued guidelines and advice to local authorities, police services and the general public, at various times and through a number of bodies, as discussed in the text.

⁴⁶ The building housing the legislative and representational bodies of Wales that, together with the Pierhead and Wales Millennium Centre, make up the *Sennedd* estate situated on the waterfront at Cardiff Bay.

⁴⁷ It is unfortunate that the term has become popular 'shorthand', as it encapsulates older, more negative associations with prison regimes and military coups. As restrictions proceeded to be implemented it became clear that these negative perceptions on the freedoms of individuals were operating, particularly amongst younger people, the so-called 'alt-right' and libertarians

⁴⁸ See BBC News <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52053914> ; UK government announcement <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-a-grant-through-the-coronavirus-covid-19-self-employment-income-support-scheme> and scheme opening <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-a-grant-through-the-self-employment-income-support-scheme>

⁴⁹ The scheme is still in operation and has been extended until end of October 2020, with applicants still able to claim a second grant from July 2020; claims for a first grant have now closed. See Citizens Advice for more information, <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/work/coronavirus-if-youre-self-employed/>

⁵⁰ The opinions expressed in this report reflect those of the author, Dr Adrian R. Marsh, and not necessarily those of the commissioners or the funders of the report.

⁵¹ The average household figure provided here is too low, if Roma and included (as they should be) in the total Romani and Traveller population in the U.K. Families average 4.5 to 5 amongst these communities, as many are extended kinship networks