

Good practice: briefing Gypsies and Travellers

An overview of the issues faced by Gypsy and Traveller communities in accessing housing and services

Summary

Local authorities have a duty to recognise and cater for Gypsies and Travellers living in their area, and to include them in their housing needs assessments. Gypsies and Irish Travellers must also be recognised as distinct ethnic groups with specific needs and concerns. Although most Gypsies and Travellers now live in settled (ie bricks-and-mortar) accommodation, they experience many difficulties in accessing services and sustaining new tenancies in settled accommodation.

- The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) estimates that between 270,000 and 360,000 Gypsies and Irish Travellers now live in conventional housing.
- Settled Gypsies and Travellers often become invisible to the authorities, due to inconsistent and inadequate monitoring.
- Gypsies and Travellers may give up a mobile lifestyle because of severe limitations to the number of available stopping places and sites, or as a result of increased support needs, relating, for example, to health and education.
- The lack of awareness among mainstream services of settled Gypsies and Travellers means the needs of this group often go unsupported, and their invisibility leads to exclusion from specialist services available to communities living in caravans on sites.
- Lack of appropriate support can hinder prevention of problems threatening a tenancy, eg eviction, debt and isolation, and leave local authorities with increased repeat homelessness and more entrenched and long-term support issues. It can also contribute to community and neighbourhood tensions.
- Racism towards Gypsies and Travellers is still regarded as socially acceptable, fuelling discrimination and increasing their distrust of support services.
- Their different lifestyle and culture can leave housed Gypsies and Travellers inexperienced in dealing with practical tenancy issues, such as paying bills and rent, and making benefits applications.
- Customary reliance on family support structures can leave Gypsies and Travellers severely isolated when housed away from sites.
- Low levels of literacy may prevent Gypsies and Travellers from accessing support or managing housing effectively.
- Housing Gypsy or Traveller households in unsuitable properties or an unsuitable area can intensify neighbourhood tensions.

This Good practice: briefing is one of a series published by Shelter. Good practice: briefings dealing with other housing and homelessness issues can be downloaded from www.shelter.org.uk/goodpracticebriefings

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Who are Gypsies and Travellers?

Gypsies and Travellers are usually visibly identified with caravans, but mobility is not their defining characteristic. Gypsies and Travellers comprise many groups, each with their own lifestyle, culture and traditions. Only Gypsies and Irish Travellers are recognised as distinct ethnic groups under the Race Relations Act 1989. However, the experiences of second or third generation new Travellers, although not a distinct ethnic group, are believed to be similar to those of Gypsies and Irish Travellers when relocated to conventional housing. Adapting from a culture of nomadism and strong family support networks to life in conventional housing, often on large estates, can be isolating and confusing. Little research has been undertaken into any of these groups' experiences, and limited recent research relates only to Gypsies and Irish Travellers.

For our purposes, this briefing uses the inclusive definition of Gypsies and Travellers under the Housing Act 2004:

'Persons of nomadic habit of life whatever their race or origin, including such persons who on grounds only of their own or their family's or dependent's educational or health needs or old age have ceased to travel temporarily or permanently, and all other persons with a cultural tradition of nomadism and/or caravan dwelling.'

It is crucial to recognise that this ethnic and cultural identity does not simply evaporate when a household moves into conventional housing.

Why is this issue important?

Today, home for the majority of Gypsies and Travellers is conventional bricks-and-mortar accommodation, rather than traditional caravans. The decision of a Gypsy or Traveller household to give up their mobile lifestyle may come about because of the dwindling availability of appropriate sites and stopping places or, through necessity, often because of support needs relating to health or education.

No definitive figures exist, but the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) has estimated that between 270,000 and 360,000 Gypsies and Irish Travellers live in conventional housing¹, around three times the number of those with a traditional nomadic lifestyle. The presence of these communities is largely invisible and their needs often go unsupported.

1 Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), *Common Ground: Equality, good race relations and sites for Gypsies and Irish Travellers*, 2006, section 1.2.

2 CRE, *Common Ground*, 2006, section 4.2.1.

3 Power, Colin, *Room to Roam: England's Irish Travellers*, 2004, section 1.3.

The lack of support for such households moving into an unfamiliar lifestyle can trigger a number of accommodation issues for individuals, local authorities, housing providers and neighbourhoods, for example:

- isolation from family support network
- failure to access key services
- rent arrears
- eviction
- repeat homelessness, and
- neighbourhood tensions resulting in racial harassment and antisocial behaviour.

At a time when the Government is looking to local authorities to increase and improve Gypsy and Traveller site provision, it is essential that the needs of these housed communities are also recognised and addressed.

Moreover, local authorities should be aware of their obligation to include these households in their regional framework for housing alongside other mobile Gypsy and Traveller communities. The Housing Act 2004 places a duty on local housing authorities to assess the needs of the Gypsies and Travellers in their area, and to provide for these needs in their Regional Housing Strategy. It is vital that Gypsies and Travellers in conventional housing are included in these assessments and in any strategic solutions.

Issues faced by these communities

- **Invisibility** Monitoring of Gypsy and Traveller communities is inconsistent and often inadequate. As a result, the location of housed Gypsies and Travellers is largely unknown and it is difficult to target specialist support at them. Often it is impossible to find out when or if these communities do access mainstream services, because they are not included in monitoring forms. Even when Gypsies and Travellers are included, monitoring of ethnicity may exclude 'new Travellers'. Members of any Gypsy and Traveller community may also be unwilling to identify themselves for fear of discrimination or harassment.²
- **Racism** Voluntary agencies working with housed Irish Travellers report discrimination within housing and homelessness services, and local neighbourhoods.³ Researchers point to a lack of

awareness of ethnicity, and a general acceptance of this overt racism. However, only rarely is such racism reported to the police (see below), making it difficult to gauge its full extent. Fear of racist abuse and discrimination can make Gypsy and Traveller households reluctant to identify themselves in the monitoring of service provision.

- **Distrust** Experience of discrimination can undermine Gypsies and Travellers' access to key services, and engender feelings of distrust. As a result, Gypsy and Traveller families in conventional housing can easily become isolated and fail to access those support services that may help them sustain their tenancies. Gypsies and Irish Travellers are less likely than other sections of the population to report offences to the police⁴, or engage with other vital statutory services, such as healthcare.⁵
- **Accessing services** Their different lifestyle and culture can leave housed Gypsies and Travellers at a disadvantage. They may not have experience of dealing with bills, rent payments or benefits applications. Evidence shows that Gypsies and Irish Travellers may fall into rent arrears and face eviction because they lack the knowledge and experience of how and where to obtain benefits or register for statutory services.⁶
- **Specific support needs** It is often a household's support needs that cause them to move from caravans into conventional housing.⁷ These can include a need to access education, escape domestic violence or treat a medical condition. This means that Gypsies and Travellers living in conventional housing may include some of the more vulnerable members of these communities. These individuals are the very people who are less able to deal with difficult housing conditions, neighbourhood tensions, or self-referral to specialist agencies for support.
- **Literacy** Low levels of literacy amongst Gypsies and Travellers can prevent them from accessing support or managing their housing effectively. Failure by mainstream services to recognise poor literacy can undermine attempts at communicating and disseminating information, thus further increasing the risk of isolation and tenancy failure.
- **Isolation** Often the move to conventional housing leaves Gypsies and Travellers separated from their community and family for the first time. In

bricks-and-mortar housing Gypsies and Irish Traveller households can experience a sense of isolation and claustrophobia.⁸ This can undermine engagement with services and with the local community, deepening misunderstanding and distrust between neighbours.

- **Inappropriate housing** Housing Gypsy or Traveller households in unsuitable properties and/or an unsuitable area can intensify neighbourhood tensions. Recent case law demonstrates that advisers should take cultural differences into account when outlining housing options to Gypsies and Irish Travellers.⁹ Some Gypsies and Irish Travellers suffer damaging psychological effects as a result of the change from a nomadic lifestyle into conventional housing.¹⁰ More commonly, unsuitable housing simply results in ongoing stress for both the newly-housed family and their neighbours. Flashpoint issues include parking caravans outside housing, living in caravans instead of the house, visits from large extended families, the hanging of game in the garden, and a preference for an outdoor lifestyle.
- **Antisocial Behaviour Orders and the criminal justice system** It is common for Gypsies and Travellers to express distrust of the police, often based on their experience of the police's failure to understand and protect them and their families.¹¹ Although Gypsies and Travellers are thought more often to be the victims than the perpetrators of crimes, their under-reporting of crime makes this difficult to investigate thoroughly.

Shelter's help to resolve the issues

Shelter believes that some local authorities, housing associations and other agencies are already demonstrating good practice in supporting Gypsies and Travellers in conventional housing. We hope that in raising these issues we can encourage you to let us know if, and how you have addressed these challenges.

To find out more about the legal definitions of Gypsies and Travellers and the mandatory needs assessment, visit: www.communities.gov.uk

To tell us about your work with Gypsies and Travellers, email: goodpractice@shelter.org.uk

This briefing is only intended as a start of the debate. Shelter plans to produce a practical guide

4 CRE, *Common Ground*, 2006, section 4.2.4.c.ii.

5 van Cleemput et al, *The Health Status of Gypsies and Travellers in England*, 2004, pages 6–8.

6 CRE, *Common Ground*, 2006, section 7.2.1.e.

7 CRE, *Common Ground*, 2006, section 7.2.1.d.

8 CRE, *Common Ground*, 2006, section 7.2.1.a.

9 Case law cited in CRE, *Common Ground*, 2006, section 1.3.

10 *R v Carmarthenshire CC, ex parte Price* [2003] EWHC 42 (Admin).

11 Power, Colin, *Room to Roam: England's Irish Travellers*, 2004, section 5.5.

to working with these groups, based on these examples of support and on effective consultation with experts and Gypsies and Travellers themselves. Shelter believes that these communities have a right to decent and safe homes, and our guide will provide some practical examples of how this can be achieved. In the meantime, if you would like to receive training on key issues in working with

Gypsies and Travellers, Shelter Training runs regular courses: www.shelter.org.uk/training

Plus, look out for our dedicated good practice conference on Gypsies and Travellers in 2008.

To be kept updated on Shelter's work with this client group please contact goodpractice@shelter.org.uk

Recommendations

Prior to the publication of Shelter's Good Practice Guide on Gypsies and Travellers, there are many points that you should consider in relation to Gypsy and Traveller communities.

Who are they?

- Are you aware of Gypsies and Travellers in settled accommodation accessing your housing or related services?
- Do you include Gypsies and Travellers on your monitoring forms?
- Do you reassure Gypsies and Travellers that they will remain anonymous and safe in their neighbourhoods?

Where are they?

- Do you seek information on the location of these communities from other sources, eg the Travellers Education Service?
- Have you mapped areas where Gypsies and Travellers are housed in your area?
- Are Gypsies and Travellers being housed in inappropriate estates or areas?
- Are statutory services in your area aware of Gypsies and Travellers' specific issues?

Do you cater for needs appropriately?

- Do mainstream services enable access for Gypsies and Travellers in housing?
- Do you communicate with these households in appropriate ways?

- Can Gypsies and Travellers in conventional housing access floating support to sustain their tenancies?
- Does your local authority consider the specific cultural needs of these communities when offering them conventional housing?
- Is tenancy sustainment support offered to Gypsies and Travellers in conventional housing?

Do you have political support?

- Is there strong political leadership on issues relating to Gypsies and Travellers?
- Have you taken steps to defuse negative portrayals of Gypsies and Travellers locally?

Are you fulfilling your legal obligations?

- Are you fulfilling your race relations duty with regard to Gypsies and Irish Travellers?
- Are these households included in your local authority's assessment of housing needs?
- Are housed Gypsies and Travellers included in homelessness and housing strategies?

To give Shelter feedback on these issues, email: goodpractice@shelter.org.uk

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