

the Traveller Movement



Conference Report 2022

“The Intersection of Poverty, Inequality and Mental Health”

17th of November 2022

About the Traveller Movement

The Traveller Movement (TM) is a leading national charity committed to the fulfillment of Human Rights for ethnic minority Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) people. The Traveller Movement’s mission is to develop a platform and voice for Travellers, working in solidarity with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities to achieve equality through self-determination and proactive participation in influencing and shaping policy.

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Acknowledgments

The Traveller Movement would like to thank:

- Pauline Melvin OBE for Chairing conference
- Mary Kelly Foy MP for delivering the keynote speech
- Our panel speakers: Chris Thomas, John McCarthy, Max Williams, Olivia Hammond, Martin Gallagher, Lucy Porter, Rheian Davies, Maurice McLeod
- All of our attendees and workshop participants
- Thank you to Innisfree Housing Association for the kind donation to the 2022 TM Conference.

Innisfree





Introduction

The UK is experiencing multiple, interconnecting crises. The Covid-19 pandemic – and its associated policy responses – continue to produce disproportionate outcomes for minority communities in myriad ways that will be outlined in the forthcoming independent public inquiry.

In addition to the health inequalities created or entrenched by the pandemic, people from a wide variety of backgrounds are experiencing the most significant cost-of-living crisis in decades. Inflation is rising, and Jack Monroe's work with the Office of National Statistics has shown that the inflation rate for some essential food staples is as high as 50%. Energy prices in the UK are spiraling, with uncertainty over whether the Governments support to date will reach the communities that need it the most.

The impacts of this cost-of-living crisis is having a devastating impact on people in the UK, who have endured a lost decade of wage stagnation and reduced access to benefits and other public services due to the political choice of austerity. But the inescapable reality is some groups will be more affected than others. Moving into this crisis, some people from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller backgrounds have lower rates of educational attainment and higher levels of unemployment than for the non-GRT population.

Economic struggles are simultaneously affecting, and are affected by, an unfolding mental health emergency. Waiting times for Children and Mental Health Services (CAMHS) now routinely exceed a year, and thousands of children and young people have attempted suicide whilst still waiting for treatment. The continued failure of the NHS and the Coroner's office to fully include ethnicities in their data frameworks means there is no reliable data for people from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller backgrounds. However, community reports of deaths by suicide – particularly amongst children and young people – are increasing at an alarming rate.

To address these profound challenges, The 2022 Traveller Movement conference brought together Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community members, campaigners, policymakers, and other stakeholders to consider the relationship between poverty, inequality, and mental health within GRT communities specifically.

In many communities there is a stigma attached to discussions around material deprivation and mental health. Conference pushed back against this stigma and instead promoted the narrative that poverty and mental illness are not individual failings for which people should be shamed; but the result of structural and institutional failings which result in the discrimination and disempowerment of entire communities and ethnicities.

The 2021 Census

Shortly after the 2022 conference took place, The Office for National Statistics published the first phase of Census 2021 data relating to ethnic groups within the UK. Following the inclusion of Roma for the first time in a national census, the Roma population was recorded as 100,981. The 2021 census marked the second time Gypsy or Irish Traveller was included as a specific ethnicity, and in the intervening 10 years since the 2011 census, the recorded Gypsy or Irish Traveller population had risen by 17.5% to 67,768.

The combined Gypsy, Roma, Traveller population of 168,749 is still likely to be a significant undercount; for many people distrust of the state and fear of prejudice results in an unwillingness to disclose their ethnicity. Independent research from the University of Salford has estimated the population at closer to 500,000.

Nevertheless, the significant increase of the recorded Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller population following the inclusion of these groups within the census demonstrates that, when public bodies and organisations ensure that people's ethnicities and backgrounds are explicitly recognised, peoples' willingness to engage increases.



Keynote Speech: Mary Kelly Foy MP



Mary began by expressing her pride and privilege at having been elected to Co-Chair the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Gypsies, Traveller, and Roma, and paid tribute to the work previous Co-Chair Martin Docherty Hughes had undertaken in post.

She noted that the TM conference was taking place at the same time as the Chancellor's Budget in Westminster, and expressed her pessimism that the budget would contain anything that communities all over the UK desperately needed, including people from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller backgrounds.

She stated Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities face extraordinary challenges – many of which would be addressed at conference. She said she wanted to speak briefly about some of these challenges but, before doing so, told conference that 3 young Travellers had recently shadowed her for a day in Parliament. The youngest person, a 12-year-old boy, expressed an interest in getting involved in the APPG's work – and Mary said that this small example demonstrated the importance of visible role models and meaningful community engagement.

Mary told delegates that she wanted to speak about the inequalities experienced by Gypsy, Roma, and Travellers in the UK today. She acknowledged that many delegates would already be very familiar with the information – but stated that it was vitally important to reiterate some hard truths.

She remarked on data indicating that the life expectancy for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities was estimated to be 10-12 years lower than the rest of the population. She said that this was a disgrace, as well as being a political choice. She noted that Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children have the lowest attainment of any ethnic group, and that Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities experienced disproportionally high levels of housing injustice. She stressed that these were the result of structural and institutional failings, not individual ones.

She noted that whilst some policy interventions had been made to alleviate these injustices, it was not enough. Mary told conference that both locally and nationally there had been a persistent failure to tackle these issues in a sustained way, and that politicians and policymakers needed to make longer, faster strides toward justice; noting that, in particular, the unwillingness of many public bodies to accurately record ethnicity data constituted an historic failure.

Mary told conference that data from Ireland showed that the Traveller suicide rate was as much as 6 times higher than the rest of the population, and said it was vitally important and welcome that this difficult subject would be addressed by conference. Mary spoke of the consultation the Government held on its 10-year mental health plan earlier in the summer, but noted that the 10-year suicide prevention plan had still not been published. She stated that the previous suicide prevention plan, published in 2012, made no explicit reference to Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities and said that this must be urgently addressed in the new strategy. She also said that the strategy must ensure that all Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people have access to culturally appropriate bereavement support.

Mary spoke of the impact of the energy crisis, and stated Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people roadside or on sites were experiencing particular energy hardship and injustice. She spoke about the financial implications of a reliance on heating oil, gas bottles, or prepayment meters. She also noted that it was not clear whether the Government's Energy Bills Support Scheme would be available to people on sites or roadsides, and confirmed that the APPG had written to the Government and tabled a number of questions in Parliament seeking clarity.

In addition to state failures, Mary spoke about the compounding impact of racism and discrimination in social life more broadly. She noted research indicating that people held more prejudiced opinions of Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers than any other ethnic group, and spoke about a hostile environment for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people.

She argued that the last Labour Government had done more for race equality than any other, and that the next Labour Government would match that legacy with the introduction of a Race Equality Act to deliver prosperity, security, and respect for all.

She concluded her speech by stating that, despite the challenges facing Gypsy, Roma, and Travellers; their groups derived enormous strength through their familial and community links, and she hoped delegates would hear much more about that over the course of conference.

She reiterated her pride in her role as the APPG's Co-Chair, and said she would carry on fighting for the rights and respect of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people in Parliament and in her own constituency.



“The conference was wonderful, supportive and had such a live atmosphere”

Quote from Kushti Bok

Panel 1: Ending the Stigma:

Exploring how the mental health and wellbeing of Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers are affected by, economic and civil inequalities, discrimination, cultural expectations, and structural barriers in accessing employment and services.

Speakers:

Martin Gallagher (Irish Traveller and Mental Health Activist)

Rheian Davies (Head of Legal Advocacy in Mental Health, MIND)

Maurice McLeod (Mental Health Campaigner and Former CEO of Race on the Agenda)

Lucy Porter (Policy Advisor, Suicide and Self Harm Prevention, Department for Health and Social Care)

Panelists spoke about the profound impact that experiences of racism and discrimination can have on mental health, wellbeing, and self-esteem. The panel noted that for many Gypsies, Roma and Travellers – and for other minoritised groups – the first experiences of racism can happen to children who are not truly old enough to conceptualise what is happening, and why they are treated differently.

Martin Gallagher spoke of his own experiences of discrimination beginning early in education, noting specifically that discriminatory behaviour often started with teachers and other adults in positions of authority or trust; which then led to a process of discriminatory and racist behaviour subsequently being adopted by peers. Martin highlighted how the normalisation of racism directly affects the mental health of minoritised people, and noted that in particular self-identity and self-worth are extremely difficult to maintain whilst navigating an institutionally racist society.

Martin's comments were echoed by Maurice McLeod, who shared his own experiences of the intersection of race and mental health. Maurice noted how his own mental health, and that of his peers, was negatively affected by social, political, and media narratives which criminalise black people – particularly black men – and highlight them as potentially dangerous and unpredictable. He noted that these experiences are also relevant to Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people who are subject to severe disproportionality in policing and criminal justice.

Rheian Davies stated that successive Governments had not done enough to tackle the mental health crisis. She noted that the Mental Health Act 1983 was an outdated piece of legislation which allowed for unacceptable treatment of people with mental health conditions by the state. She noted the Government's publication of a draft mental health bill to replace the outdated legislation as a welcome step, but argued that more action was needed from the Government in order to adequately protect, and support, people from minoritised communities. She stated MIND's position that the Bill must contain strict provisions governing the use of detention, that Community Treatment Orders should be phased out, and that the Bill's overarching priority should be to strengthen the rights of the individual, and make eliminating racism a priority focus for decision makers.

Lucy Porter spoke of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent cost of living crisis, on the mental health of people from all backgrounds in the UK – noting that it had been an exceptionally difficult period. She acknowledged that for some groups, issues were compounded by a lack of access to appropriate support at the right time. Lucy stated that the Department for Health and Social Care were keen to learn from the lived experiences of Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers to ensure the forthcoming Suicide Prevention Strategy was inclusive of, and responsive to, the needs and concerns of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people. Lucy acknowledged data gaps resulting from ineffective frameworks on collection of ethnicity data, and stated that this was an area in which the Department for Health and Social Care needed to improve.

Panel 2: **The Cost-of-Living Crisis:**

Navigating the impact of spiraling energy prices on poverty and pre-existing economic inequalities for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities; and considering the policy interventions and support required for economic inclusion and social justice.

Speakers:

John McCarthy (Irish Traveller and Traveller Movement Trustee)

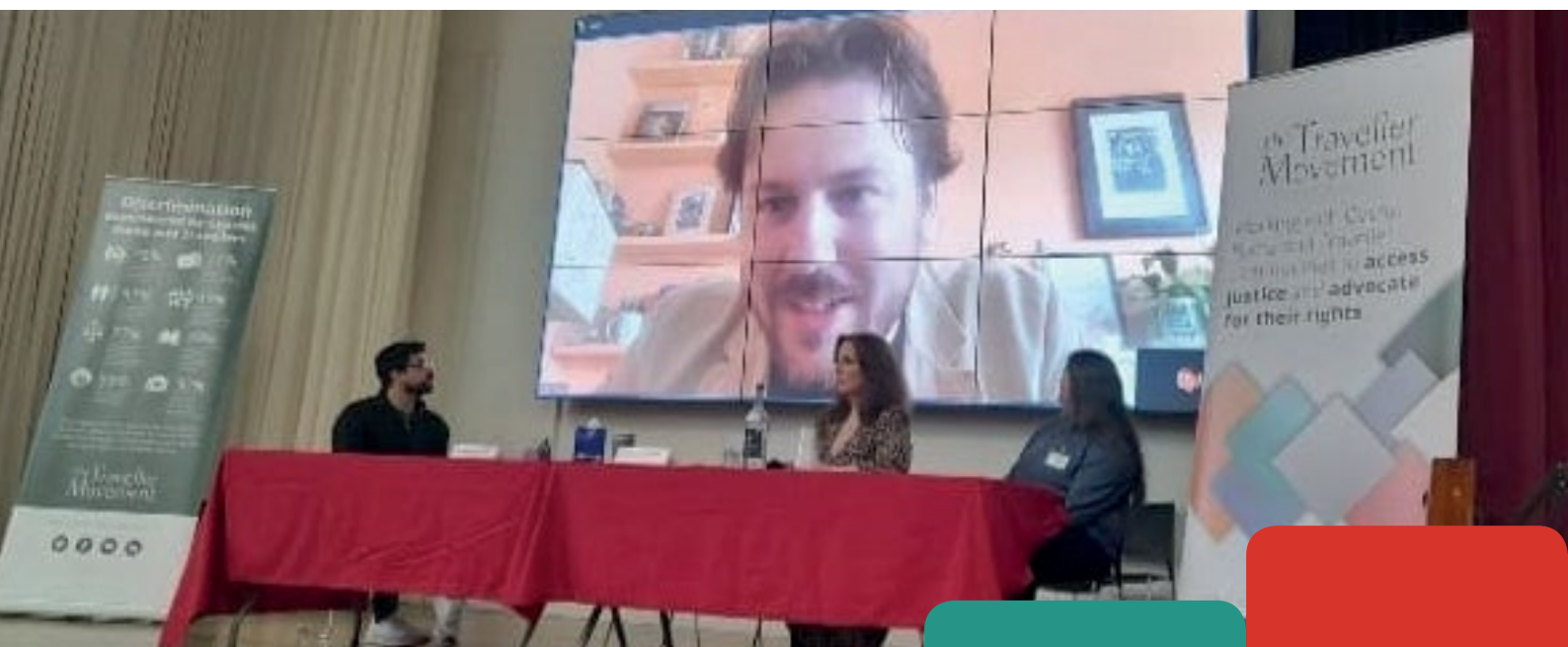
Olivia Hammond (Romany Gypsy Activist, Teacher, and Project Facilitator)

Max Williams (Researcher, Runnymede Trust)

Chris Thomas (Head of Health and Prosperity Coalition, Institute for Public Policy Research)

John McCarthy discussed some of specific ways in which the cost-of-living crisis affects Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities, particularly those resident on sites, which may not be generalisable to other minoritised groups. He spoke of the frequent difficulties people living on sites encountered in having mail delivered which creates significant difficulties in people accessing various forms of local or national government support, which may require hard copy documentation. He also noted that a lack of reliable mail delivery also has significant implications for bill payment and debt collection, which drives people in further into hardship. John echoed the previous remarks of keynote speaker Mary Foy MP, remarking that the failure of the energy bills support scheme was just one example of services and support not being designed with Travellers in mind; arguing that this is the norm, rather than the exception.

Chris Thomas discussed the intersection of cost-of-living and standards of health. He argued that the disproportionalities and inequalities facing Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities constituted a public health emergency. As a salient example, he stated that cold homes were linked to stroke, heart attack and depression, and stated that in the UK someone dies roughly every 7 minutes as a result of having a cold home. He noted that many people are being forced into eat-or-heat decisions this winter, but stated these problems predate the current cost-of-living crisis. He argued that policymakers should view health inequalities as an economic imperative, and that equality in health should be seen as a foundational element of the Government's economic strategy.



Olivia Hammond discussed the need for long-term solutions to economic inequality that do not only centre around the welfare system or the support provided by central and local Government in response to specific crises. She argued that high levels of people from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller backgrounds not being in education, training or employment were one of the root causes of economic inequality. She stated that access to non-precarious jobs with decent wages was an imperative, but that in order for people from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller backgrounds to access such jobs, much more needed to be done to improve the accessibility of formal education, as well as further education and other skills development.

Max Williams echoed a recurrent conference theme by remarking on the poor quality of data available on the experiences of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities, but provided a variety of data from Runnymede Trust's recent research indicating the deeply racialised nature of the cost-of-living crisis. He noted that minoritised groups were more likely to be in food insecurity, more likely to be in fuel poverty, and more likely to be in relative poverty. As with other speakers he acknowledged that racial inequalities preceded the current crisis, with the ethnicity poverty gap having grown steadily since 2011. Max spoke of the importance of designing policy to ensure groups with diverse needs have access to government support, and argued for the implementation of better measurements and use of ethnic data collection to improve policymakers' understanding of how policy interventions will affect different groups.

Workshop 1: Making Ends Meet

Chair: Greg Sproston

Speakers:

Chilli Reid (Executive Director, Advice UK)

Christian Zik-Nsonwu (Policy Manager, Irish in Britain)

Baie Varey (Facebook Admin, Traveller and Gypsy Recipes and Tips)

Tony Panayiotou (Head of Inclusion, Trussell Trust)

A wide-ranging workshop considered how the impact of the cost-of-living crisis was being felt from a number of different angles, with participants specifically discussing the resilience of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities; the hard-to-reach nature of many advice and voluntary services; staff burnout and fatigue within voluntary services; and inadequacy of central and local government support both before and during the ongoing crisis.

Participants spoke of the adaptability and resilience of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities when facing hardship; something deeply rooted in entrenched patterns of alienation and discrimination. They also acknowledged that the cost-of-living crisis is a systemic failure, not an individual one and that recommendations for change should be made with this in mind.

Participants pointed to the confusion around the extent and variability of support available from central Government; and data indicating £15bn of means-tested benefits are unclaimed every year was used to make an argument that support isn't reaching the people who most need it. Advice and frontline organisations spoke of the importance of 'meeting people where they are', either through the provision of mobile services, or by ensuring wraparound support to ensure advice and guidance on a range of topics was made available during first contact.

Representatives of local authorities spoke of specific schemes which had been developed to support the most marginalised and vulnerable communities. Details of these schemes were well received by the workshop, but there was a general agreement that awareness of such schemes amongst Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities was not sufficient.

Additional inequalities experienced by Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people living on sites was explicitly mentioned, particularly in the context of energy injustice. Friends, Families, and Travellers and the Traveller Movement updated the workshop on actions undertaken to seek assurances from central Government that the Energy Bills Support Scheme would be available to residents on sites, and advised of an upcoming webinar on energy injustice, which would consider the impact of rising energy prices on site residents in greater detail.

The workshop recommended:

- Renewed efforts on the part of local authorities to meaningfully engage with Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities, based on a principle of “Don’t assume, ask.”
- Recruitment of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller volunteers and staff for advice and support organisations; as visible role models, and to act as a conduit between frontline services and communities
- Greater dialogue and collaborative working amongst local authorities and between local authorities and the third sector in order to share best practice and success stories



“The energy in the room was amazing throughout the day. The strength of the community voices was remarkable – it gives me hope for positive change”

Quote from Innisfee CEO

Workshop 2:

We Need to Talk about Suicide

Chair: Professor Margaret Greenfields

Speakers:

Lourdes Colclough (Head of Suicide Prevention, Rethink Mental Illness)

John McCarthy (Traveller Movement Trustee)

Mubeen Bhutta (Head of Policy & Campaigns, Samaritans)

Martin Ward (Traveller Mental Health Activist)

Workshop participants discussed the wide range of cultural, social, and economic factors which can result in suicidal feelings and suicide within Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities. These included sexuality, difficulty in finding stable employment, inaccessibility of state benefits, domestic abuse, toxic masculinity, traumatic deaths of children, intra-community shaming narratives, and inadequacy of mental health and bereavement support. Many participants spoke with the benefit of lived experiences, but the workshop acknowledged the significant and damaging data gaps in mental health and suicide outcomes

Participants strongly noted that both life experiences – and cultural conceptions around suicide and mental health – may differ considerably between Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities and spoke of the importance of not viewing the 3 ethnicities as a single homogenous group. It was noted that, whilst dominant narratives on suicide focused on younger people, crisis can occur in older generations due to an accumulation of issues over the years and it is important for support services to explicitly acknowledge the mental health concerns of older people.

Participants highlighted what they saw as a strong link between suicide and social media; with social media acting as a conduit for community shaming narratives, and also as a conduit for racist and discriminatory hate speech from the non-Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller population.

The workshop highlighted the inadequacy, and at times unsuitability, of crisis support and wider mental health provision. Many participants noted that support only seemed to be available at the point where people were at severe risk, and pointed to insufficient funding and barriers to routine mental health services as an explanation for this.

Many participants felt that more people were coming forward to talk about their mental health than in the past, but felt that rather than this being a result of a taboo having been broken, was more attributable to the fact that mental health crisis has deepened and broadened.

The workshop strongly felt that peer support in mental health services, along with greater representation – and visibility – of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller voices was fundamental to successful service provision.

The workshop recommended:

- That the NHS data dictionary should be revised to include Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller ethnicities; and that Coroner's reports should record ethnicity as a matter of routine
- That all healthcare professionals, and other public sector employees working in frontline roles, should receive unconscious bias training, and training on Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller culture
- That unconscious bias training - as well as suicide/mental health training which is specific to Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities - should be delivered by people from those communities

Workshop 3: No Right Way to be a Traveller – Celebrating the Individual

Chair: Fr. Dan Mason

Speakers:

Laura Angela Collins (Author and Community Activist)

Dan Cash (Community and Campaigns Officer, London Gypsies and Travellers)

Aoife Delaney (Women's Officer, Traveller Movement)

To guide participants in framing their own lived experiences of individuality within the context of policy recommendation, the workshop chair Father Dan Mason posed two questions: What support services should there be for individuals who have been subject to shaming, and how can services ensure Travellers are treated as individuals, rather than solely as members of an ethnic minority group.

Participants noted that the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller 'community voice' is often undermined by the poor quality of relationships between community members and service professionals. Feelings of being misunderstood by services are commonplace, driven by a lack of awareness over cultural norms and values and exacerbated by a paucity of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller professionals employed in services. Participants felt that this lack of coherent community voice results in people from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller backgrounds being othered, or reduced to their ethnicity and nothing more.

Religion was remarked on heavily by participants; who noted that whilst the Church physically (and religious faith more broadly) is understood as a place of comfort and safety. However, it was felt that this sometimes conflicts with the Church's teachings, which may be considered outdated and contribute to complicating people's understanding of their own individuality and personhood. It was argued that stigma and family values narratives have been informed by the Church, and that the Catholic Church needs to display more sensitivity and celebrate the dignity of individuals, as well as communities.

Participants argued that shaming narratives are more pronounced in communities which are the most discriminated against and that 'by Travellers, For Travellers' was a fundamental principle when tackling shaming and stigmatising narratives.



Participants spoke of interfaith forums being an important avenue for the provision of bereavement support, as well as for raising awareness on mental ill health and suicide prevention more generally.

The workshop also spoke about the experiences of Young Travellers specifically, who may find it harder to develop a sense of identity that incorporates both their Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller heritage and the way they interact with the wider world. It was felt that some young Travellers were not aware of their own rich cultural and community histories, and participants spoke of a lack of representation and visible Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller role models in wider society.

The Workshop recommended:

- That the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller community voice be amplified with the provision of internal community support 'by Travellers, for Travellers' in order to address mental ill health and shame-based violence
- That Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller organisations do more to raise awareness of history, culture and values in order to a public sector that is better informed, and Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities that are attuned to their heritage
- That ethnicity categories should be more representative and reflective of the identities that Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people have in order to drive more effective data collection, and more inclusive policies and practices.

Workshop 4: See us, Hear us, Don't Forget us!

Chair: Declan O'Driscoll

Speakers:

Shane Curran (Education Officer, Open Doors Education and Training)

Charlie Doherty (Irish Traveller & Traveller Movement Intern)

Christian Johnson (Policy Officer, Traveller Movement & Tutor, Open Doors Education and Training)

The workshop initially considered how youth services are defined and remarked upon the lack of a uniform or statutory definition of youth services encompass a defined range of service; resulting in significant variability as to what constitute youth services in different areas of the country. Participants considered whether youth services for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people differ to those for the rest of the population, either by design or implementation.

Participants agreed that youth service provision for young Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers should not be distinguished from 'mainstream' youth provision, but that youth organisations and public bodies needed to develop specific strategies to improve access to and participation of mainstream youth services amongst Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities, as well as those from other isolated and disenfranchised groups. Participants agreed that the priority objective for such organisations should be to increase the overall inclusivity of youth service provision without compromising the efficacy of services themselves.

The workshop acknowledged that pockets of good practice do exist in the provision of youth services for young people from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller backgrounds. However, it was argued that two main hurdles impeding good practice were: a lack of effective communication between service providers and community groups/Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller sector organisations; and the development of effective practices being more attributable to individual leadership as opposed to good structural design of services which foregrounds the need of minoritised communities.

Participants discussion on the need for greater communication and collaboration within the sector strongly reflected the key findings developed by young Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller peer researchers as part of Traveller Movement's Roads to Success report.

The workshop felt that public bodies did not give enough consideration to assessing – and addressing – the root structural causes that contribute to the numbers of young people who are not in employment, education, or training; and specifically discussed the importance of visible role models and community led action; improved mental health provision; and access to good quality pastoral and educational mentoring as important facets in youth service provision which able to address the root causes of inequality of outcomes.

The Workshop recommended:

- That public bodies, youth services, and Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller sector organisations should prioritise partnership models to better integrate service provision and disseminate best practice
- That local authorities, youth services, and other organisations should internally review their own Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller engagement and provision; with a view to identifying avenues for improvement
- That local authorities, youth services and education providers should explore alternative education models which better accord for the specific needs of young people, including the provision of mentoring, mental health provision, and employment support



“Highlight of the day for me was meeting ‘Nanna Varey’”

Quote from Community Member

Conference 2022 Evaluation



166
Attendees



Quality of
workshops
88%
felt it was
good-excellent



Subjects
presented
94%
felt it was
good-excellent



Whole event
94%
felt it was
good-excellent



Meeting
expectations
95%
felt it was
good-excellent



Venue/
Facilities
94%
felt it was
good-excellent



Quality of
speakers
93%
felt it was
good-excellent



Booking
process
94%
felt it was
good-excellent



Organisation
on the day
90%
felt it was
good-excellent



Food/
Refreshments
93%
felt it was
good-excellent



“It was fantastic”

Quote from Policy Manager, Irish in Britain

SAVE THE DATE

Our next Annual Conference

Will be on Thursday 16th November 2023,
Lambeth Town Hall.

The Traveller Movement, 40 Jeffrey's Road,
Stockwell, London, SW4 6QX
Tel 020 7607 2002

www.travellermovement.org.uk

 info@travellermovement.org.uk

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