

## Cultural Considerations

This briefing provides an overview but is not intended to be the definitive source of all relevant evidence, legislation or guidance. The term 'Gypsies and Travellers' is generally used and will include Roma and other culturally nomadic travellers – often abbreviated to GRT. We do not suggest that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are the same, but this acronym is used for the sake of brevity.

## Background

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people belong to minority ethnic groups that have contributed to British society for centuries. Their distinctive way of life and traditions manifest themselves in nomadism, the centrality of their extended family, unique languages and their entrepreneurial economy.

**Irish Travellers:** Traditionally, Irish Travellers are a nomadic group of people from Ireland but have a separate identity, heritage and culture to the community in general. An Irish Traveller presence can be traced back to 12<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland, and to Great Britain in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The Irish Traveller community is categorised as an ethnic minority group under the Race Relations Act, 1976, the Human Rights Act 1998, and the Equality Act 2010. Some Travellers of Irish heritage identify as 'Pavee' or 'Minceir', which are words from the Irish Traveller language, Shelta (which can also be referred to as 'Cant' or 'Gammon').

**Romany Gypsies:** Romany Gypsies have been in Britain since at least 1515 after migrating from continental Europe during the Roma migration from India. The term Gypsy comes from 'Egyptian' which is what the settled population perceived them to be because of their dark complexion. In reality, linguistic analysis of the Romani language (which is the only indigenous language in the UK with Indic roots) proves that Romany Gypsies originally came from Northern India, probably around the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. The Romani language (also spoken by Roma) is considered to consist of at least seven varieties, each a language in their own right. French Manush Gypsies have a similar origin and culture to Romany Gypsies.

**Roma:** Roma communities also originated from India from between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries and have historically faced persecution, including slavery and genocide. They are still marginalised and ghettoised in many Eastern European countries where they are often the largest and most visible ethnic minority group, sometimes making up 10% of the total population. However, 'Roma' is considered a political term and a self-identification of many Roma activists. In reality, European Roma populations are made up of various subgroups, some with their own form of the Romani language, who often identify as that group rather than by the all-encompassing Roma identity.

**Other Travellers:** There are other groups of Travellers who may travel through Britain, such as Scottish Travellers, Welsh Travellers and English Travellers, many of whom can trace a nomadic heritage back for many generations and who may have married into or outside of more traditional Irish Traveller and Romany Gypsy families. There were already

indigenous nomadic people in Britain when the Romany Gypsies first arrived hundreds of years ago, and the different cultures and ethnicities have to some extent merged.

All Travellers speak English in most situations but will often speak to each other in their own language.

## **Cultural Considerations and Competency**

Cultural competency is a process which entails continuously developing and refining our capacity to provide effective healthcare and other services whilst taking into consideration people's cultural beliefs, behaviours and needs. Developing a good understanding of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture will improve communication by facilitating the flexibility and openness necessary for interaction between people from different backgrounds.

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are often categorised together under the acronym 'GRT' in Britain and under the 'Roma' definition in Europe. These communities and other nomadic groups, such as Scottish and English Travellers, Show People and New Travellers, do share a number of characteristics in common, including the importance of family and/or community networks, the nomadic way of life, a tendency toward self-employment, experience of disadvantage and having the poorest health outcomes in the United Kingdom. However, given that Gypsies, Travellers and Roma each have very different customs, religion, language and heritage – this should be a consideration in engagement with specific communities.

Gypsies and Travellers are keen to share their culture and beliefs and questions are always welcomed if service providers are unsure of anything. Doing this shows respect and minimises the risk of something being done in the mistaken belief that it is culturally correct.

When visiting sites, it is also important that service providers are clear about their reasons for visiting. Privacy is very important to Gypsies and Travellers and any intrusion into what they consider to be their private concerns could lead to a rapid loss of trust with the practitioner concerned.

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers consider themselves to have a distinct identity apart from the settled resident 'Gorja' or 'country' population.

## **Family**

Family, extended family bonds and networks are very important to the Gypsy and Traveller way of life. It should be noted that:

- Gypsies and Travellers generally marry young and respect their older generation.
- Most of the younger generation and some of the older generation use social network platforms to stay in touch.

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- Family anniversaries, births, weddings and funerals are usually marked by extended family or community gatherings with strong religious ceremonial content (see Religion below).
- Involving the family in any and all aspects of an individual's care where appropriate (see Gender Roles below) is extremely important and the family are likely to want to assist with treatment and decisions. It can be helpful to communicate that your services are meant as a complement to the family's care and not a replacement.
- Some older Gypsies and Travellers are referred to as Aunt or Uncle as a sign of respect by immediate and extended family members. It is worth establishing whether your doing this would be welcomed ahead of any verbal communication.
- For both Irish Travellers and Romany Gypsies many family members and friends will travel for miles to visit the person who is severely ill and terminally ill patient will never be left alone.
- Irish Travellers will call the priest to read the last rites and confession just before death and will keep a vigil with candles lit near the bed of the dying person to light the way to the afterlife – and these candles are kept illuminated until after the funeral. In the Irish community it is believed that 'God now lights the heavens to them'.
- In both cultures, after death there will continue to be a constant flow of visitors who come to pay their respects to the deceased and their family. In both traditions close family members will wear black following a death in the family. Typically this will be for a year following the death of close family members. Some traditional Travellers will wear black for the rest of their lives following the death of very close family members.
- Possessions such as clothes, bedding and the vehicle or trailer, if they passed away in it, are traditionally burnt. This is done as a sign of respect to the person, so the possessions go with them to the afterlife and to aid the spirit to leave this world for the next.
- Photographs are now often placed on the graves for both the Romany and Irish Traveller community's. They enable the family to connect with the spirit of loved ones but also as a community, many of whom are non-literate, it is a way of identifying the graves of family members or people from the community that they knew
- The height of headstones and colours used are extremely important for the Traveller community. The size symbolises the love and respect they had for their loved ones and the larger the headstone the greater the respect and love the family feel they can portray. Due to changes in regulations many Travellers are now forced to have smaller headstones which can cause great distress for the community.

## Homes

Traveller communities value cleanliness and tidiness as this relates to a core cultural tradition around cleanliness of the home. It can be useful:

- On entering someone's caravan or 'bricks and mortar' home to ask if you need to remove your shoes
- Gypsies and Travellers use separate sinks for washing different items. If providing healthcare in someone's home, ask which facilities can be used for which activity.

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- Try not to refuse an offer of hospitality, such as a tea, coffee or water. Some Gypsies and Travellers may feel that a refusal of hospitality suggests that you want to spend as little time as possible in the caravan or house and it can be seen as a lack of respect.
- Cups or plates should not be put on the floor for any period of time as this is considered to be unclean. Likewise, bags should not be put on tables or anywhere that food or drink may be consumed, as they are likely to have spent some time on the floor.
- Gypsies and Travellers have very clear hygiene rules and may not wish to share toilets with others. Bear this in mind and try to use any communal or site office toilets if they exist.
- Some may be offended if site visitors pat a dog and then offer the same hand to shake a community member's hand. This can be seen as a lack of respect as dogs are considered unclean by some.

## Gender Roles

In terms of gender roles:

- It may be advisable for mixed gender teams to visit sites or arrange communal events on site, where possible, as a male may only feel comfortable talking to another male and a female another female.
- Certain subjects may be considered taboo to be discussed in front of the opposite sex. Practitioners should ensure that issues such as sexual health or feminine hygiene are discussed discreetly and not in front of male Gypsies and Travellers.
- Female Gypsies and Travellers are unlikely to tell their male relatives exactly what is wrong with them, especially if it is gynaecological. Therefore they may need a healthcare practitioner or other service provider's support to create and maintain a convincing cover story, especially if repeat treatment or hospital stays are needed. For example a stomach complaint rather than a gynaecological one.
- Gypsy and Traveller women and girls are likely to have lots of experience looking after children so be careful not to patronise them. Ask them about their knowledge and experience and respect this.
- Women may be unwilling to breast feed due to taboos about exposing breasts in public. Mentioning pregnancy in front of males can be seen as 'shameful'. Even acknowledging or congratulating in front of males may not be seen as appropriate. Unless the family is well known to you, best practice would be not to mention pregnancy in front of the men or boys when you don't know the family.

## Communication & Engagement

Communication difficulties between Gypsies, Roma and Traveller and health and other service staff are common. This may be due to a lack of cultural understanding or time on the part of practitioners, or as a result of illiteracy or a lack of confidence in explaining what the issues are on the part of Gypsies and Travellers:

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- If you need to refer to Gypsies and Travellers' ethnicity for monitoring or reports, it is better to politely ask what they would rather be called than to assume. Be clear about the reasons for requesting their ethnic identity.
- Try to keep the number of site visitors to a minimum unless residents have previously stated that they are happy to receive large groups.
- This may also be due to a lack of understanding on the part of Gypsies and Travellers about how the NHS works.
- In recognition of potential low levels of literacy, develop ways in which information can be provided to Gypsies and Travellers in non-written formats, such as audio and DVD.
- The value of face-to-face communication and giving advice over the telephone also cannot be underestimated. Communicating information and advice in these ways and via text messages, answerphone/voicemail messages or recording onto a mobile telephone or smartphone voice recorder are methods which are known to work.
- While many Travellers have access to their own transport, it is worth noting that many authorised sites are located away from residential areas and away from public transport routes. It is also the case that some taxi firms will not attend sites. Consider developing drop-in sessions at locations where Gypsies and Travellers live, either using site facilities or offices. Make a point of checking the understanding of what has been said during a consultation. Use straightforward language and keep jargon to a minimum.

### Trust

Until trust is developed:

- Visit sites accompanied by someone known to and trusted by residents. This could help encourage other community members to use services as well as support other professionals to work effectively with the communities.
- Minimise staff changes wherever possible and give advance warning of any staff changes.
- Dressing informally when visiting people at home may help to put them at ease.
- Do not make any promises that can't be kept. Many Gypsies and Travellers have been let down many times and can be very distrustful of people, even those with the best intentions.
- If you have made a commitment to be in touch with a community member on a certain day, it is important that you are. Even if you have nothing to update them with, the fact that you have been in touch and met a commitment will help reinforce the trust in your relationship.

### Religion

Many Irish Travellers are practising Catholics, while some Gypsies and Travellers are part of a growing Christian Evangelical movement.

**Links to other resources**

[Cemeteries and Burial: Culture and Traditions for people from the Traveller communities](#)

**Links to other GRT Briefing Notes**

1. [Demographics](#)
2. [History and Legislation](#)
3. [Homes](#)
4. [Unauthorised Encampments](#)
5. [Health](#)
6. [Education, Skills & Training](#)
8. [Employment](#)