**Homelessness Experiences of Young Gypsy and Traveller People in Hackney**

**A group of people sitting around a table

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London Gypsies and Travellers

July 2023

**Report:**

A pink sign with black text

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Acknowledgements

Our team expresses its gratitude to all those who contributed to the process or provided data to support it, including all of the people interviewed and the London Gypsies and Travellers team.

Executive summary

Gypsy and Traveller communities face unique challenges in securing appropriate accommodation due to a number of factors, including the severe shortage of culturally suitable homes. London Gypsies and Travellers is an organisation that works with these communities and, through its Accommodation and Advocacy Service, has observed first-hand the difficulties encountered by Gypsy and Traveller individuals and families.

For the past year LGT has run a specific homelessness project with Gypsy and Traveller people in Hackney between the ages of 18 and 30 alongside its Accommodation and Advocacy Service. This involves advising, advocating and signposting in different ways to help get specific solutions for those who are homeless in Hackney – be it street homeless, fleeing domestic violence, being overcrowded, being asked to leave the family home or any other reason for facing homelessness.

This project has provided detailed data about who is seeking help and what they need assistance with. LGT’s relationship with these communities has also facilitated a series of one-to-one interviews with 10 individuals, from which we also bring to life the problems in securing housing through the case studies and quotes within this report.

## Challenges faced by the communities

## Cycle of insecure housing

For young Gypsy and Traveller people needing their own home, either because they live in overcrowded housing, are starting their own family, or being asked to move away by their parents, housing options are very limited.

There is a lack of Gypsy and Traveller sites which would be a culturally suitable option for many individuals and families. Private rented housing in London is extremely unaffordable and insecure, as it poses increased risk of evictions. There is also a severe lack of social rented homes across London limiting the options for families who can’t afford the private rented sector.

This leads many young people to apply for housing assistance with their local authority. A cycle of insecure housing occurs when people unable to find a suitable home are placed in temporary accommodation or housing that does not address their health needs. This is one of the main factors why young people may struggle to maintain their tenancies or licences, which can lead to the council withdrawing their duty to house them. For people who become intentionally homeless, it’s more difficult to start this process again, often while facing barriers that prevent them from accessing support.

## Inaccessible services and unheard voices

Some of the barriers facing young people in accessing services include:

* Not feeling safe, heard, or trusted
* Digital exclusion as more and more services go online
* Language barriers
* Discrimination
* The need for advocacy services such as LGT to navigate the system
* Confusion over roles between the council and its partner agencies
* Lack of action

In the context of Hackney, the effects of the October 2020 ransomware attack continue to be felt in the delivery of services, as does the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic, where face-to-face services have not fully resumed.

## Wider impacts

Poor social housing and insecure, temporary accommodation can have significant impacts on physical and mental wellbeing. Particular impacts on Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers include:

* Health outcomes and life expectancy are lower than the British average
* Stress and mental health are aggravated by housing insecurity
* Educational attainment is significantly lower than other groups
* Engagement in services and trust in authorities
* Racism and prejudice

**Recommendations for Hackney Council**

## Provide more culturally suitable accommodation.

* Build more council housing and Traveller sites.
* Explore the use of negotiated stopping as an alternative to unsuitable emergency and temporary accommodation, such as hostels or being placed outside the borough.

## Learn from good practice

* Ending the use of hostels as temporary accommodation -Southwark Council announced this as a policy goal in February 2021 and from our work this has been somewhat achieved and is something that Hackney could replicate.
* Council companies for the private rented sector & housing register policy amendments - Enfield Council received funding from the then MHCLG for a pilot project of retooling their arm’s length Private Rented Sector Company, Housing Gateway, into Enfield Let. This not only allowed them to purchase property in Enfield for use as PRS Accom for homeless families but also allowed said tenants to remain on the housing register and bid for properties despite being in the PRS.

A smaller version of this has been done in Haringey under the name Homes for Haringey Ltd.

## Make homelessness services more accessible and inclusive.

* Provide clear visual guidance throughout the application and allocation process, including information to help residents settle in, know where to get advice, and how to access other support.
* Ensure that online housing application platforms and council websites are mobile-friendly and meet accessibility standards.
* Support individuals to navigate the process effectively by having a named person and contact information in the council to get in touch about updates and to report issues
* Organise face-to-face housing and homelessness surgeries
* Provide translation and interpretation support where needed
* Recognise the needs of people living roadside

## Resource forums and partnership working

* Resource and convene regular meetings bringing together Gypsy and Traveller people residents, council officers, and other relevant stakeholders to address specific housing concerns, gather feedback, and work together to develop solutions

## Training for council and housing officers

* Provide comprehensive training for council and housing officers on the specific risks and challenges faced by Gypsy and Traveller residents in order to foster cultural competence and a deeper understanding of the unique circumstances these groups encounter when seeking housing.

Having a dedicated Traveller team (or worker) within local authorities for managing sites and being a focal point for all Gypsy and Traveller work – not just enforcement is a great example of best practice in Hackney and has been previously replicated successfully by a former team in Haringey. However, it is essential to ensure all council services are inclusive of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and that not all issues are just sent to this team.

# 1. Introduction

This report aims to address the challenges faced by Gypsy and Traveller people in attaining secure accommodation in Hackney, London. Conducted through interviews with individuals supported by London Gypsies and Travellers, the research explores the multifaceted issues people within these communities encounter.

The report begins by introducing the topic of insecure housing faced by Gypsy and Traveller young people in Hackney. It highlights the significance of this issue within the broader context of housing challenges experienced by marginalised people. The background information establishes the social, cultural, and economic factors contributing to the cycle of insecure housing, emphasising the need for targeted interventions and policy changes.

To provide a comprehensive understanding, the report utilises a mixed-methods approach. The research methodology involved conducting interviews with individuals supported by London Gypsies and Travellers, allowing for first-hand insights into their experiences. By incorporating their voices, the report aims to amplify the perspectives and challenges faced by Gypsy and Traveller people in securing stable accommodation.

The report delves into the cycle of insecure housing, exploring the underlying causes and consequences for Gypsy and Traveller young people. The inaccessibility of services and the resulting lack of trust are also examined, since these further exacerbate the challenges faced by these communities. The wider impacts of insecure housing on health and education are discussed, highlighting the far-reaching consequences of these challenges.

The report includes examples of best practices that have shown promise in addressing the issue of insecure housing among Gypsy and Traveller people young people.

Based on the findings and insights gathered throughout the report, a set of recommendations is proposed. These recommendations aim to inform relevant stakeholders on actionable steps to address the challenges faced by Gypsy and Traveller people in housing.

## London Gypsies and Travellers

London Gypsies and Travellers is an organisation dedicated to advocating for the rights and wellbeing of Gypsy and Traveller people in London. With a rich history spanning several decades, the organisation has played a vital role in addressing the unique challenges faced by these communities. It works to promote social inclusion, combat discrimination, and ensure access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and secure accommodation.

London Gypsies and Travellers engages in community outreach, policy, advocacy, and research initiatives. The organisation collaborates with community members, local authorities, and other stakeholders to develop sustainable solutions and improve quality of life for Gypsy and Traveller individuals and families. Through these efforts, London Gypsies and Travellers aims to challenge stereotypes, promote cultural understanding, and empower the community to participate fully in society.

### The London Gypsies and Travellers Accommodation and Advocacy Service

The Accommodation and Advocacy Service plays a vital role in supporting Gypsy and Traveller people families throughout London. The largest proportion of families accessing the service are from Hackney, followed by Haringey and Enfield. The Service’s primary focus relates to addressing unsuitable, insecure accommodation and homelessness. Using a community-development and asset-based approach, London Gypsies and Travellers empowers individuals and families by helping them navigate the complex housing system, represent themselves effectively, and understand their rights. Over time, the demand for the Accommodation and Advocacy Service has grown significantly, leading to consistent waiting lists. Meeting this growing demand has become increasingly challenging.

The core objective of the Accommodation and Advocacy Service is to assist people in maintaining secure tenancies and overcoming barriers in accessing adequate accommodation. For instance, the Service provides support to families living in temporary accommodation by helping them request reviews when their current living arrangements are unsuitable. This includes cases where, for example, families with mobility issues are placed on higher floors or when families with children living with disabilities are located far from essential support networks or educational institutions. London Gypsies and Travellers advocates for these families, facilitating access to legal representation to ensure their housing rights are upheld.

### London Gypsies and Travellers Hackney Young Travellers Homelessness Project

Between June 2022 and July 2023, LGT’s Accommodation Advice Service worked on a specific project supporting young people facing homelessness in Hackney. During this period, the team has worked with 56 people, many of whom accessed support on behalf of their whole household. In total, 67 adults and 63 children benefited from this project.

The age range recorded is between 18 and 30, reflecting the particular housing needs of young people within Gypsy and Traveller communities as they leave the home they grew up in. This was also the most pressing issue presented to London Gypsies and Travellers when Hackney Travellers approached the Accommodation and Advocacy Service for support.

The service was accessed by more women (31) than men (25) that were representing the household. Of the 53 people, 12 are Irish-born, 42 of Irish descent, while two are of Roma ethnicity.

30 of 56 households that accessed the services needed help with both Benefits & Housing together. Some accessed the project for the first time in 2022/2023 and others accessing the general AAS previously starting as far back as 2014 up to the present day.

The main causes of homelessness were:

* Overcrowding in house – 11
* Overcrowding in pitch on site – 2
* Parents suffering financially – 6
* Relationship breakdown - 2
* Fleeing domestic abuse – 5
* Evicted by private sector landlord – 1
* Eviction from Council Site - 1
* Prison Leaver – 1
* Fleeing Violence – 1

# 2. Context

## Gypsy and Traveller people’s experiences

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities encompass diverse ethnicities and cultures, each with distinct characteristics and housing needs. The term ‘Roma’ is often used to refer to people with Romani heritage from various parts of Europe. ‘Romany Gypsy’ specifically refers to individuals and communities with Romani ancestry in the UK, while ‘Travellers’ encompasses diverse groups, including Irish Travellers, Scottish Travellers, and English Travellers.

Experiences of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people in the UK highlight ongoing challenges and inequalities faced by these communities. Despite being recognised as ethnic minority groups under the Equality Act 2010, they continue to face marginalisation and discrimination in many aspects of life, such as healthcare, education, and social exclusion.

### Healthcare

Gypsy and Traveller people experience severe health inequalities, even when compared to other ethnic minority groups.[[1]](#footnote-2) The lack of consistent data collection on Gypsy and Traveller people hampers efforts to address these inequalities effectively.[[2]](#footnote-3)

### Education

Many Gypsy and Traveller children face exclusions, discrimination and bullying in schools. There is a pressing need for the government, local authorities, and Ofsted to prioritise equal educational opportunities for all children, including Gypsy and Traveller children.[[3]](#footnote-4)

### Social exclusion

Gypsy and Traveller people are often subjected to structural and overt discrimination from service providers. Current government policy exacerbates the situation.[[4]](#footnote-5) Additionally, their historical and cultural contributions are often overlooked or underrepresented in mainstream narratives.[[5]](#footnote-6)

### Housing

While both Roma and Gypsy and Traveller communities face discrimination and stigmatisation, it is important to recognise each group’s unique background and housing needs. Tailored approaches that address the specific challenges each group faces, will help to ensure equal access to suitable and culturally appropriate accommodation.

Roma people often face specific housing challenges due to their history of migration and discrimination. Their housing needs include access to secure accommodation that meets basic standards, protection from forced evictions, and integration support to overcome barriers related to language, education, and employment.

On the other hand, Gypsies and Travellers – including Irish Travellers, Scottish Travellers, and English Travellers – often have a history of travelling lifestyles and a preference for living in caravans or other mobile dwellings. They may require appropriate sites or pitches with basic amenities and infrastructure to maintain their traditional way of life. These communities may face challenges related to lack of provision of social rented sites, difficulties securing planning permission, discrimination, evictions and criminalisation for families who live roadside, and limited access to services, such as education, healthcare, and sanitation facilities.

## Housing crisis

Social housing plays a crucial role in addressing the housing crisis and providing secure and affordable homes for those in need. The decline of social housing over the past 40 years has contributed significantly to the current housing crisis in England.[[6]](#footnote-7) From the 1940s to 1980, governments built an average of 126,000 social homes annually. Last year, only 6,463 new social homes were delivered, despite an estimated need for 3.1 million more social homes are estimated to be needed over 20 years. This shortage of affordable homes has led to sharp increases in private rents and homelessness.

Over the last decade the number of social rented homes in England has decreased by more than 100,000. Consequently, temporary accommodation has emerged as a solution provided by councils to homeless households while they wait for a settled home.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Although temporary accommodation was initially intended for emergency situations, it has become a long-term arrangement for many households. Nearly 100,000 households, which include over 125,000 children, currently reside in temporary accommodation, with the majority living there for a year or more. This phenomenon occurs mainly in London, with 6 in 10 households living in temporary accommodation accommodated by London boroughs.

Living in temporary accommodation presents numerous challenges. It is often insecure, unsuitable, and unaffordable for homeless individuals and families. Many households experience constant insecurity, isolation and disruptions due to placements outside their local area, and moves forced upon them for administrative reasons.

## Case study: Unsuitable temporary accommodation

When AC had her first child she lived with her cousin but was asked to leave after she had a second baby, because there wasn’t enough space for them.

AC was supported to approach the council by London Gypsies and Travellers. She was placed in a hostel, where she has been living for three years. AC, her two children (now aged 2 and 3) and her husband all live in a self-contained room in the hostel, with a bathroom and kitchen. They have four single beds in the room and limited floor space. The kitchen has a Perspex roof and “gets really cold”. Because the heating is on a timer for the whole building, she has no control over it.

AC is a carer for her husband. He has difficulty walking and lives with anxiety and depression. AC says he “is very anxious around people”. He often wakes up at night with panic attacks.

AC says a review of her temporary accommodation was refused, so she is waiting to hear from Hackney Community Law Centre. Aside from London Gypsies and Travellers she has not accessed any other support or services. She feels the council should be doing something, but instead “they are blaming me and telling me it’s fine”.

**AC’s story highlights the unsuitability of temporary accommodation for both young families and those living with mental health conditions. For AC, living on a site with people they don’t know would be difficult because of her husband’s social anxiety.**

### Impact on Gypsy and Traveller communities

The housing crisis particularly impacts Gypsy and Traveller communities, due to the severe shortage of culturally suitable homes. The 2008 London-wide Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment identified a need for 768 new pitches between 2007-2017, but only around 20 additional pitches have been delivered as extensions on local authority sites since then.

Hackney Council’s own Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment from 2018 identified a need for 92 new pitches needed by 2033[[8]](#footnote-9).

Whilst a new London-wide assessment of the accommodation needs of Gypsies and Travellers is being conducted, it is clear that there is considerable need for more suitable accommodation.

# 3. Research approach and activities

This research project reflects the needs of Hackney Travellers, based on accommodation advice requests to London Gypsies and Travellers. It seeks to understand the specific experiences that Gypsy and Traveller people – particularly younger people – in Hackney have when trying to access housing and temporary accommodation.

In general, understanding Gypsy and Traveller people’s experiences is hindered by insufficient and inconsistent data. However, the embedded knowledge and trust that London Gypsies and Travellers has built up in this area enables the organisation to gain valuable insights. This project aimed to provide greater understanding as a first step toward improved housing outcomes for Gypsy and Traveller people.

When interviewing people from Gypsy and Traveller people communities, London Gypsies and Travellers identified a list of key research questions. In total, seven interviews were carried out with ten members of the community who had accessed London Gypsies and Travellers housing support. Although this is a small sample, respondents shared valuable insights across a variety of experiences. They include families with young children, single people living alone, those who do and do not have English as a first language, those with complex health needs, and those with care responsibilities towards another adult.

# 4. Cycle of insecure housing

For young Gypsy and Traveller people needing their own home, either because they live in overcrowded housing, or starting their own family, or being asked to move away by their parents, housing options are very limited.

There is a shortage of Gypsy and Traveller sites which would be a culturally suitable option for many individuals and families. Private rented housing in London is extremely unaffordable and insecure, as it poses increased risk of evictions. There is a severe lack of social rented homes across London limiting the options for families who can’t afford the private rented sector.

Therefore many young people would apply for housing assistance with their local authority.

A cycle of insecure housing occurs when people unable to find a suitable home are placed in temporary accommodation, housing that does not address their health needs, or assisted to access insecure private rented accommodation. This is one of the main factors why young people may struggle to maintain their tenancies or licences, which can lead to the council withdrawing their duty to house them. In the private rented sector, people may face no-fault evictions through Section 21, or the landlord reclaiming the property for sale. Subsequently, the tenant must seek support from the council again, a situation that may reoccur over several years. For people who become intentionally homeless, it’s more difficult to start this process again, often while facing barriers that prevent them from accessing support.

The model of the cycle of housing insecurity highlights the barriers faced by marginalised people in accessing and maintaining stable housing. These barriers are often overlooked and inadequately addressed by housing services and support systems. The cycle typically involves a range of interconnected factors and challenges, such as:

* **Housing disruptions:** evictions, displacement, or loss of housing
* **Financial constraints:** economic barriers, including limited income, unemployment, or lack of affordable housing options
* **Unclear or inaccessible routes:** services being digital by default, language barriers, lack of knowledge of systems
* **Being placed in inappropriate housing:** such as those which are not suitable for disabilities, without the separate bedrooms needed for different genders, far away from families and support networks
* **Discrimination:** For instance, private landlords discriminating against people from Gypsy and Traveller people communities or discrimination within the planning system
* **‘Invisible homelessness’:** homelessness which may not fit standard definitions, such as people currently sleeping on the floor of a family member or friend

## Case study: Cycle of insecure housing

P was asked to move out of his two-bedroom family home in Hackney by his parents, who also housed his two brothers.

He contacted London Gypsies and Travellers who supported him to make a homeless application through Greenhouse, the Hackney Council service for single homeless people. P called Greenhouse but says all they were able to do was send an email. He says he visited Greenhouse a couple of times but it, “wasn’t really any help” and it took them, “a long, long time” to get him a place in a hostel.

P moved into a hostel but then started a relationship, which meant he had to move out again. With nowhere else to go, P had to return to the family home. Because he brought his partner with him, the property was now even more crowded than before.

Greenhouse sent an email to the case worker about P’s new circumstances, but the case worker didn’t respond. P says he was at Greenhouse everyday. He kept having the same conversation with Greenhouse and the council. He felt like he was in a worse situation then before and the process was, “very, very, very, very slow”. In the end, it took a month and a half for his partner to be added to his housing application.

P, who lives with depression, found the stress of trying to get into a hostel – and trying to get back in after he had started a relationship – mentally draining. He feels like the only support he received was from his family and London Gypsies and Travellers. He wasn’t aware of any other charities and says he didn’t receive any help from the council.

After 11 months in a hostel P and his partner were offered permanent accommodation in a flat in Hackney. When the door needed repairs P didn’t know how to get in contact with anyone about it. He’s now in touch with the Housing Officer, who has helped manage the repair.

Overall P feels Greenhouse and the council should help a lot more when someone is homeless. He felt like they didn’t care enough to do anything. Conversely, he found London Gypsies and Travellers “made everything a lot easier”, even providing advice about rent and Universal Credit since he moved into his permanent home.

**P’s story highlights the length of time people must wait to access temporary accommodation and the challenges of navigating the system when circumstances change. For P, these factors took a toll on his mental health. He feels like he only got what he needed because of his family and London Gypsies and Travellers.**

## How insecure housing impacts Young Gypsy and Traveller people in Hackney

### Stuck in the cycle of insecure housing

The interviews reveal that young Gypsy and Traveller people in Hackney feel trapped in a cycle of insecure housing, enduring lengthy stays in hostels and residing in unsuitable flats. There was a sense of frustration and despair over the lack of placement in appropriate accommodations. As one interviewee expressed:

“If the council can give you the property you are suitable for at the beginning, then you wouldn’t need to go through all this effort. They don’t care, they are just buying time constantly.” (Interviewee)

Gypsy and Traveller communities may have a greater reliance on council housing compared to the general population. This is due to several factors, including private sector landlords who may be unwilling to rent to members of these communities. This is in addition to the discrimination anyone who relies on housing benefits encounters when seeking accommodation in the private sector. Additionally, the lack of generational property ownership or wealth within the communities limits opportunities to access housing. Consequently, council housing often becomes a crucial route for Gypsy and Traveller individuals and families to access stable and secure housing.

Many of those spoken to shared their experiences of transitioning to the private sector, only to encounter further insecurity due to unsustainable living conditions or the sale of the property they were occupying. This precariousness in the private sector was a cause of concern, as illustrated by a participant who said:

“It would be good if we were taken more seriously at the council. We were found a landlord’s place, but it was still not suitable for Mum’s needs… We are getting evicted from the landlord’s place after two years, so have to go back to the council again anyway.” (Interviewee)

Instability of housing situations was viewed as an inevitable consequence, with individuals relying on ongoing support from the council. One interviewee shared their current predicament, stating:

“I am still on the housing register now, and I am still bidding. My landlord is now moving out and told me they will evict me. I have three children. I don’t want to go to a hotel or hostel or live with other people I don’t know. I’m scared. I don’t need anything nice, just somewhere I can look after my children.” (Interviewee)

One interviewee felt they had no other option but to take legal action:

“We were in a hostel for three years. Then went into temporary accommodation flat for another three years, but they didn’t give it from the kindness of their heart. We got a lawyer and had to fight our way out.” (Interviewee)

### Lack of Traveller sites

This research showed that the idea of a place on a Traveller site was widely seen as an ideal. However, given the limited number of available pitches, this ideal is seen as so unattainable that it isn’t worth considering:

“I would take a place on a site, but the chances of that ever happening is… it’s never going to happen.” (Interviewee)

The lack of Traveller sites in the UK pushes Gypsy and Traveller people to seek accommodation in bricks and mortar housing, which has significant effects on their community. Historically, these communities have faced discrimination, inequality, and social exclusion, which are perpetuated when forced to settle in conventional housing.

The transition from a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle to bricks and mortar housing disrupts the close-knit community ties integral to Gypsy and Traveller culture. Traditional communal practices, cultural norms, and kinship networks are challenged, leading to a loss of identity and community cohesion.

Bricks and mortar housing often fails to meet the specific needs of these communities. Inadequate provision of culturally appropriate amenities, such as space for caravan parking or areas for community gatherings, further marginalises Gypsy and Traveller individuals and perpetuates feelings of exclusion and discrimination.

While Gypsy and Travellers communities lack confidence that their housing needs can be met, limited consultation and involvement in housing policies and site allocation decision-making processes undermines their rights and exacerbates social inequalities.

### Hidden homelessness on sites

The interviews revealed instances of insecure and unsuitable housing situations within Traveller sites, which authorities had not addressed. For instance, a young family, including a three-month-old baby, was forced to sleep on the floor of a cramped caravan for six months. Devoid of privacy and unable to access appropriate living conditions, the family’s physical wellbeing was compromised, and they were exposed to increased health risks.

“There are too many people on top of us, we aren’t getting any proper sleep and no privacy literally.” (Interviewee)

Additionally, one young man lives in constant fear of eviction because he resides in an unapproved location on a site with his caravan. The looming threat of displacement causes stress and anxiety, and his overall quality of life.

Because these people are not seen as instantly homeless, they are judged as not needing immediate support.

### Unsuitable accommodation

Adequate housing provision that respects the cultural values and specific needs of Traveller communities is crucial for their wellbeing, heritage preservation, and social inclusion. It serves as a cornerstone for overall quality of life and plays a significant role in ensuring the continuity of unique customs and traditions. However, the interviews uncovered instances where young people within these communities were subject to housing arrangements that failed to address their specific requirements.

One example involved families being placed in temporary hostels where strict visitor restrictions were enforced. This isolation not only hindered their emotional wellbeing but limited access to vital family support networks, social connections, and community engagement.

“No family were allowed to visit us… Mum had a stroke and mental health issues. I think her health got worse, especially her depression, as she couldn’t get in and out very easily and no one could come see her except me as I was living with her.” (Interviewee)

In some cases families were assigned living spaces that required older children of different genders to share quarter, impacting their privacy, personal space, and autonomy.

“…with the hostels it’s basically only one room [for one household] and it affects your mental health as there is a lot of noises and there’s no other rooms to escape into.” (Interviewee)

A number of interviewees did not have the inappropriateness of their accommodation recognised by members of the local authority. This affects trust in working together with the local authority and optimism that the situation will change.

“When they [the council] know it’s not suitable, they should be doing something about it but instead they are blaming me, telling me it’s fine.” (Interviewee)

Moreover, individuals were expected to reside in accommodation during traditional travelling periods, jeopardising their security and stability. Failure to comply with residency requirements often resulted in the threat of eviction, exacerbating the already precarious housing situation faced by many Gypsy and Traveller people.

One of the key challenges affecting young people and families is being placed in temporary accommodation or another type of property outside of the borough, and even out of London. The impacts of being isolated from family and community support networks, and being uprooted from areas where people have a sense of belonging and access trusted services are further compounded by the severe inequalities, marginalisation and discrimination that the communities routinely experience.

# 5. Inaccessible services and unheard voices

## Hackney context

The research conducted in Hackney focused on two significant barriers to services in the area. Firstly, the ransomware attack on Hackney’s IT services in October 2020 had a profound impact on social care, housing benefits, council tax, business rates, and housing services. This cyber-attack resulted in the loss and disruption of records and support systems, creating ongoing challenges for the affected services. The repercussions of this attack continue to be felt, impeding the smooth functioning and accessibility of essential services in Hackney.

Secondly, face-to-face services that were suspended during the Covid-19 pandemic have not fully resumed. The pandemic necessitated the closure of in-person service provision, which impacted the community’s ability to access necessary support. The absence of face-to-face services makes it difficult for some individuals to receive direct assistance.

## Case study: Barriers to accessing support

A, who is self-employed, was previously renting a flat with her partner but, after they had children they separated. She applied for benefits but they weren’t enough to give her any options in the private rented market, so she applied for the housing register, which she has been on for ten years.

A currently lives in private rented accommodation but there is damp in the house, which A says makes her children sick. She has taken them to the doctor and has a letter from her GP. When she tried to give this to the housing register she was told it wouldn’t change anything.

A says it used to be much easier to deal with the housing register. A couple of years ago, “I just told them I had my kids and my circumstances and it was OK. You went there, filled in the form, and that was that”. Today she has to communicate over the phone, which she finds stressful. As a Polish Roma, she says she doesn’t have the best English. Older members of her family, with poorer English skills, find it very difficult to resolve problems with housing or housing benefit.

A feels people from the council “don’t take the time” to understand and help her and that they “make it very difficult”. “They give you more documents,” she says, “but nothing happens”. When they were supposed to check her band, A says they told her, “it doesn’t matter if you change your band”.

When A gave London Gypsies and Travellers her case worker contact details they were, she says, “committed to making sure that I had my rights and the banding I was meant to”. They managed to get a better band for her case and – contrary to the council – told her that having the right banding could speed things up.

A’s landlord has now told her they will evict her because they are moving. She is scared about what this means for her and her children. When she spoke to the council, they made it clear she didn’t have to leave until she received a Section 21 notice. A describes this as the “first time the council were helpful and nice to me”.

**A’s story highlights the challenges people experience when communicating with the council, especially if they have limited English language skills. For A, the requirement to communicate digitally or by phone makes her feel unheard and unsupported. The only person that she says was committed to helping her was from London Gypsies and Travellers.**

## Particular impacts on Young Gypsy and Traveller People in Hackney

### Not feeling safe, heard, or trusted

Respondents felt unheard in the housing process, even in situations of high need. One person spoke about having to leave their family home due to overcrowding and the challenges of waiting to enter temporary accommodation:

“I feel like, with [name of service] and the council, I think they should help a lot more with the ones who are homeless, or urgently needs a property and things like that. I feel like I kept having the same conversation I was having with everybody else. [name of service] and the council think like that, in my opinion, I don’t feel like they care enough to sort it out.” (Interviewee)

Situations like this often led to increased vulnerability and unsuitable housing situations. In the case of a young mother living in a hostel, it led to an unsafe situation for her and her family:

“When I was at the park nearby with my kids… some people my family have been feuding with came up to me and threatened me and I am too scared about it to go to the Police.” (Interviewee)

Though this is an extreme case, this mother felt she had no safe way to seek help and no route out of the situation. Two of the ten people interviewed shared experiences of feeling uncomfortable and afraid about having to share living space with people they did not know, for example in hostels.

### Digital inclusion

Housing services being moved online negatively impact on individuals and families who find the system inaccessible and difficult to navigate and would prefer to return to a face to face service as prior to the Covid19 pandemic.

At least one Roma person interviewed, who also referenced her older family members struggling with accessing services:

“When I speak on the phone, some people like you [interviewer] understand and take the time to help me. However, with many people from the council, they don’t take the time and make it very difficult. With everything being digital and over the phone I don’t know how to do this… Nowadays it’s very hard to get into the contact centre. Before you went in and sat with someone. Now everything is over the phone…”(Interviewee)

### Language barriers

Closely linked with digital inclusion, language inaccessibility compounds challenges faced by those in the Roma community, particularly older people with limited English language skills. It is notable that while only one Roma community member was interviewed for this project, language barriers immediately emerged as a serious issue.

“…I don’t have the best English for a Polish Gypsy, but generally, I am able to communicate well. I struggle to communicate with them and it makes this situation stressful… All my family we try, but it is very difficult, especially my older members of family whose English isn’t as good as mine. If you have some problem with housing or housing benefit it’s very hard to fix this.” (Interviewee)

Language barriers may extend beyond different languages, to include challenges arising from strong accents, dialects, or the use of specific words within the same language. These linguistic differences hinder communication between Travellers and individuals who are not familiar with their speech patterns. It can lead to misunderstandings, limited access to services, and social exclusion.

### Discrimination

Discrimination can be difficult to prove, even when someone experiences it directly; they may be uncomfortable reporting or discussing it for fear of reprisal, particularly regarding housing. It may also be difficult to clearly demonstrate if a case of mistreatment is due to someone’s ethnic or cultural identity, or simply the product of an insufficient and overburdened social-housing system. The burden is unfairly placed onto those experiencing discrimination to prove it is taking place. Regardless, this is undoubtedly an element that impedes access to suitable housing when Gypsy and Traveller people navigate housing systems.

There is ample literature showing that Gypsy and Traveller people experience discrimination in many areas. For instance, discrimination within the planning system means that Gypsy and Traveller site applications are disproportionately rejected.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Four respondents of the ten mentioned that they felt they had experienced discrimination during their time navigating the housing system – some directly, others via language barriers or digital access:

“[In reference to the housing officer] She wasn’t taking any of mum’s health seriously and her needs. She was discriminating against us. One time, she tried to make me calculate the rent we could pay, but I found it hard and she made me feel stupid. If it wasn’t for you [London Gypsies and Travellers] getting into the case I don’t know what would’ve happened.” (Interviewee)

### The need for advocacy services such as London Gypsies and Travellers

Gypsy and Traveller people have the lowest outcomes of any ethnic group across areas like education, health, employment, criminal justice and hate crime.[[10]](#footnote-11) These communities frequently struggle to navigate the many barriers within the housing system and are unable to access suitable housing. As a result they seek support from third-party organisations, such as London Gypsies and Travellers, whose Accommodation and Advice Service is consistently oversubscribed. Services like this were referenced by seven of the ten people interviewed:

“… with your service… [London Gypsies and Travellers staff], everybody helped me the way they could and it just made everything a lot easier.” (Interviewee)

Two people reported receiving insufficient or no response from the respective authority until a third party became involved.

*“With all the evidence we showed [Shelter] they said we were too long in the hostel with two kids and they threatened to take the council to court and that’s when we were moved to [our current place].”* (Interviewee)

Others attempted to advocate for themselves, but no action was taken, even in cases where proof from healthcare or other professionals (which is supposed to expediate the process was provided:

“I have the GP letter. I tried to give this to the housing register, but they told me it won’t change anything.” (Interviewee)

Three people reported that they had not been in touch with any other organisations than London Gypsies and Travellers or that London Gypsies and Travellers signposted them to Hackney Community Law Centre. The reasons for this are unclear. This area could benefit from further research.

“…it was just you [London Gypsies and Travellers], we also tried [name of Hackney Traveller Manager], but we couldn’t get through to her. [A local councillor] referred us to a food bank.” (Interviewee)

“London Gypsies and Travellers has helped me to speak with the council and with Greenhouse [Single Homeless Unit within Hackney Council]” (Interviewee)

“I was helped to approach the council by London Gypsies and Travellers and have been in this hostel room for three years now from the council.” (Interviewee)

“I have only spoken to you guys, and I am waiting to hear from Hackney Community Law Centre as a review of my temporary accommodation was refused.” (Interviewee)

Conversely, respondents sometimes said they felt they had exhausted the resources available to them.

### Overlapping roles

The overlapping responsibilities and communication gaps between Hackney Council and Greenhouse hinder the seamless provision of support, causing frustration and potentially impacting the timely delivery of housing services to those in need. Addressing this issue requires improved coordination, clarification of roles, and streamlined processes to ensure efficient and effective referrals for support and housing.

### Lack of action

Two respondents reported that even when they self-advocated or sought support from third-party services, there simply wasn’t much response:

“…mostly when the council isn’t doing much either you or her [Hackney Traveller Manager] get in touch with them and they do something for a bit but not for long.” (Interviewee)

*“[We’ve been in touch with] you, the doctors and [Hackney Traveller Manager]. The GP has said they would do any letters or anything they can to help us then they can.”* (Interviewee)

In other cases, people receive inaccurate information:

“They are supposed to hear me and understand me and support me. But they don’t. They try to cut you off. They were supposed to check my band, they said ‘it doesn’t matter if you change your band, you still have to wait for 20 years’ which wasn’t true which is what [a staff member at London Gypsies and Travellers] told me it isn’t true and by getting the right banding, it can happen quicker than that.” (Interviewee)

# 6. Wider impacts

Poor social housing in London has significant impacts on health outcomes. Inadequate levels of social housing have been found to affect children’s physical and mental health, potentially hindering their development in the long term.[[11]](#footnote-12) Living in noisy, crowded, or uncomfortable environments can contribute to sleep problems and increase stress and anxiety levels.[[12]](#footnote-13)

While the links between housing and health have long been established, there has historically been little understanding of the sense of creating a home in its less tangible form, such as the importance of being able to personalise a space. Recent research now shows this can impact wellbeing too.[[13]](#footnote-14)

## Why it particularly impacts Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers

### Health outcomes and life expectancy

Gypsy and Traveller people have higher infant mortality rates than white British communities and Gypsy and Traveller men have higher rates of physical health conditions.[[14]](#footnote-15) Gypsy or Traveller men are 12.4 times as likely to suffer from two or more physical health conditions, while Roma men are five times more likely.[[15]](#footnote-16) Access to health and social care services is a larger issue for Roma people than any other ethnic group; they are 2.5 times more at risk of not having access than the white British population.[[16]](#footnote-17)

The interviews echoed these wider statistics, with examples of babies sleeping on floors of caravans and this, from a single man who lives in a caravan in a non-permitted area:

“It’s really cold in the caravan in the winter, and I can’t get the money for the gas bottles as I don’t have a licence. It’s probably affecting my asthma, and mental health, and I don’t even realise.” (Interviewee)

### Stress and mental health

A high proportion (65%) of Gypsy and Traveller young people are affected by suicide in their families.[[17]](#footnote-18) Though this is sometimes linked with hate incidents, this same group often experience insecure housing. Living in unsuitable accommodation, where there is limited space to take time away from other people can exacerbate already poor mental health. One interviewee, a young woman living in a hostel with her partner and two children, discussed the challenges caused by her partner’s anxiety:

“He wakes up a lot throughout the night. He has panic attacks, and he cries at night, and it stops my kids sleeping.” (Interviewee)

Housing insecurity in itself also acts as an additional stressor:

“I am constantly worried about being moved off.” (Interviewee)

### Education

The Gypsy and Traveller communities in the UK face educational challenges and disparities, leading to lower achievement levels than other groups. At the age of 4 to 5, just 29% of Irish Traveller and 33% of Gypsy/Roma children eligible for free school meals achieved expected educational levels, compared with 53% of white British pupils eligible for free school meals.[[18]](#footnote-19)

At GCSE level, free-school-meal-eligible children from Gypsy/Roma (17%) and Irish Traveller (22%) backgrounds had the lowest Attainment scores of all comparable ethnic groups, well below the average of 34.9%. In 2019/20, only 8% of Gypsy/Roma and 20% of Irish Traveller pupils achieved a grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSEs, compared with a figure of 49.9% for all pupils.

This overall context matters when we consider the effect insecure accommodation has on education. Research has highlighted the adverse impact of temporary accommodation on children’s education.[[19]](#footnote-20) The disruption caused by frequent changes in housing can force children to be enrolled in new schools or face interruptions in their schooling.[[20]](#footnote-21) This can lead to instability and negatively affect educational progress and overall academic performance.

### Racism and prejudice

Gypsy, Roma, Irish Traveller, and other travelling communities face significant discrimination and racism. A national survey conducted by the Centre on the Dynamics of Diversity and supported by Friends, Families and Travellers revealed that Gypsies and Travellers experienced the highest levels of racially motivated abuse among all minority ethnic groups surveyed. 62% reported such incidents, while 47% of Roma people had been racially assaulted, and 37% had experienced physical attacks.[[21]](#footnote-22)

### Engagement in services and trust

The Gypsy and Traveller communities in the UK have historically faced challenges and varying experiences when it comes to working with authorities. It is important to note that experiences and perspectives within these communities are diverse, every individual may not share the same feelings. However, certain factors contribute to a general sense of mistrust towards authorities.

One key factor is the historical and ongoing marginalisation and discrimination that Gypsy and Traveller people face in the UK. These communities have often been subjected to negative stereotypes, prejudice, and systemic discrimination, leading to a breakdown in trust between community members and authorities. Experiences of discrimination, including instances of forced evictions, exclusion from public services, and unequal treatment, have contributed to a sense of scepticism and reluctance to engage with authorities.

The experiences highlighted by interviewees give additional endorsement to this scepticism. Relations between authorities and the Gypsy and Traveller people are therefore difficult to broker.

# 7. Examples of best practice

The following examples of best practices are derived from London Gypsies and Travellers’ extensive work in London. These examples showcase successful approaches that have positively impacted families. They provide valuable insights for crafting specific recommendations that focus on targeted strategies rather than an entire policy framework.

It is important to note that the full extent of these policies’ effectiveness and their potential ramifications on other components of the homelessness support system remain unclear. Further analysis and investigation are necessary to comprehensively evaluate the implementation and outcomes of these strategies.

## Hackney’s dedicated resource to work with Gypsy and Traveller people

Hackney is one of a number of local authorities that has a dedicated role to liaise with Gypsy and Traveller communities around site management and enforcement. The role goes beyond simply managing sites and enforcing regulations, providing support for Gypsy and Traveller families. This support is essential, as those interviewed noted how difficult it can be to access services. It eases the difficulties faced by Gypsy and Traveller people by helping then navigate the system.

This approach could be replicated in other areas. By providing support to Gypsy and Traveller people, local authorities can help to improve their lives and reduce the negative outcomes that result from difficulty accessing services.

Relying solely on a specific person or team for Gypsy and Traveller community engagement may, however, inadvertently divert attention from the broader goal of fostering inclusivity throughout the system.

It is vital to ensure that all council officers adopt an inclusive approach and are equipped with the necessary knowledge and cultural sensitivity to effectively engage with and meet the needs of Gypsy and Traveller people communities. By promoting inclusivity throughout the council, a more comprehensive and sustainable support system can be established, enhancing overall wellbeing and inclusion for Gypsy and Traveller people communities in Hackney.

## Southwark ending the use of hostels as temporary accommodation

In February 2021, Southwark Council announced a new policy to end the use of hostels as temporary accommodation. This is a significant move that will have a positive impact on the lives of many people.

Staying in hostel-based temporary accommodation can be a very disruptive experience. People who are placed in temporary accommodation often have to move several times, which can make it difficult to settle into a routine and build relationships. They may also have to share facilities with other people, which creates, privacy, wellbeing and security concerns.

The new policy means that people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are now offered a tenancy in the council’s name. This will be a self-contained property with it’s own bathroom and kitchen, giving people a much-needed sense of security and stability.

The policy does still allow for placement in hostels and other temporary accommodation for up to 28 days – but no more than that.

## Council companies for the private rented sector

In Enfield and Haringey in north London each borough has created a company that can rent properties directly to tenants. Enfield Council’s housing company, Enfield Let provides Assured Shorthold Tenancies that enable Enfield tenants to be in a private rented sector property and bid, and even get extra points, on the housing register.

In 2022, Enfield moved 240 families out of temporary accommodation into properties with three- to five-year leases. The brough is projected to move 100 more in 2023.[[22]](#footnote-23) A smaller version of this approach has been implemented in Haringey.

Enfield have changed their policy in June 2023 so that people who are now homeless and approach them will be offered temporary accommodation or private rented accommodation outside of Enfield borough and likely outside of London but they are specifically not using hotels or hostels. These tenants will still be able to bid on the housing register. Any previous tenants placed in private rented properties in Enfield will still be able to bid and will not have to move due to this change of policy.

These initiatives have enabled a significant number of individuals to break free from the cycle of insecure housing, since people are able to bid for housing while transitioning between private rented properties. They therefore accumulate priority on the housing register during their years of instability.

# 8. Recommendations

This preliminary research has shown that the barriers Gypsy and Traveller people experience when attempting to access housing are often systemic. The recommendations below are designed to create a more just system where Gypsy and Traveller people can meet their basic needs and thrive. They affirm the dignity and strength of Gypsy and Traveller people as they advocate for their basic needs in this challenging context.

## Provide more culturally suitable accommodation

* Build more council housing and Traveller sites
* Explore the use of negotiated stopping as an alternative to unsuitable emergency and temporary accommodation, such as hostels or being placed outside the borough

## Learn from good practice in other London Boroughs

* Ending the use of hostels as temporary accommodation -Southwark Council announced this as a policy goal in February 2021 and from our work this has been somewhat achieved and is something that Hackney could replicate.
* Council companies for the private rented sector & housing register policy amendments - Enfield Council’s approach has allowed families to remain on the housing register and bid for properties despite being in the PRS.

A smaller version of this has been done in Haringey under the name Homes for Haringey Ltd.

## Make homelessness services more accessible and inclusive

* Provide clear visual guidance throughout the application and allocation process, including information to help residents settle in, know where to get advice, and how to access other support
* Ensure that online housing application platforms and council websites are mobile-friendly and meet accessibility standards
* Support individuals to navigate the process effectively by having a named person and contact information in the council to get in touch about updates and to report issues
* Organise face-to-face housing and homelessness surgeries
* Provide translation and interpretation support where needed
* Recognise the needs of people living roadside

## Resource partnership working

* Resource and convene regular meetings bringing together Gypsy and Traveller residents, council officers, and other relevant stakeholders to address specific housing concerns, gather feedback, and work together to develop solutions

## Training for council and housing officers

Provide comprehensive training for council and housing officers on the specific risks and challenges faced by Gypsy and Traveller people residents in order to foster cultural competence and a deeper understanding of the unique circumstances these groups encounter when seeking housing.

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