



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Rt Hon Matt Hancock

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

By email

8 June 2020

Re: Addressing the invisibility of Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities in the PHE review

Dear Secretary of State

We write as co chairs of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma to raise our concerns relating to the PHE 'Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19' publication. We welcome the publication, however, we are deeply concerned by the invisibility of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities within the information presented.

As a result of pre-existing health inequalities, combined with poverty, overcrowding and historic issues related to accommodation, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are at higher risk of being infected by COVID-19. In tandem, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are known to face some of the most severe health inequalities and poor life outcomes amongst the UK population, with higher rates of long-term illness, health problems or disabilities, higher overall prevalence of reported chest pain and higher levels of respiratory problems.

For a number of years, organisations working on behalf of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities have highlighted that the exclusion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller ethnicity categories from the NHS Data Dictionary means that the health inequalities experienced by these groups often remain unconsidered both by policymakers and services. Given the historic failure to collect this data, we were unsurprised that there was insufficient data available to carry out an analysis on the impact of coronavirus on members of these groups. We are therefore concerned that any action taken to address inequalities uncovered by the assessment are therefore likely to overlook the issues faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

Just last year, commenting on the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into the inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, Maria Miller, then Chair of the Committee said,

"Gypsy Roma and Traveller people have been comprehensively failed by policy makers and public services for far too long.. the Government must stop filing this under 'too difficult' and set out how it intends to improve health, education and other outcomes for these very marginalised communities who are all too often 'out of sight and out of mind'."

There were two opportunities within the report to specifically highlight the absence of data but potential for inequalities related to coronavirus within Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities – within the chapter on ethnicity and within the chapter on Inclusion Health. However, Gypsy and Traveller communities are only mentioned twice briefly in relation to methodology, whilst Roma communities are not mentioned within the report at all.

In the chapter on ethnicity, it is highlighted that a number of factors mean that BAME groups are likely to be at increased risk of acquiring the infection. Many of the factors, including overcrowding, levels of deprivation, types of job and country of birth are disproportionately represented with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, as well as additional issues in accessing water and sanitation during lockdown. It is also highlighted that people of BAME communities are likely to be at increased risk of poorer outcomes once they acquire the infection due to co-morbidities including cardiovascular disease, hypertension and diabetes, all of which are also found disproportionately in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

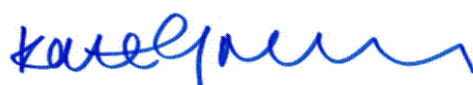
In the chapter on Inclusion Health, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities receive no mention at all, even though they are one of the four key inclusion health groups commonly listed in Government definitions of Inclusion Health. Further to this, in section 6.4, the report highlights that there have been 67 diagnoses of COVID-19 among people assigned a 'no fixed abode' (NFA) code. There is an assumption that those assigned a 'no fixed abode' code are rough sleepers, yet the Government's own figures on unauthorised encampments estimate there are at least 3000 caravans on unauthorised land, which are likely to represent over 10,000 people who would be classified as 'no fixed abode'.

We understand that now this important work has been undertaken to identify the nature of inequalities relating to coronavirus, the next step for the Government will be finding ways to close the gap. Given the lack of data or information included in PHE's review, we would be keen to hear how you will make sure Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are not side-lined or ignored in the actions the Government will take to address inequalities related to coronavirus.

In addition, we are keen to hear if you have considered other ways you may be able to collect information on risks and outcomes of Covid-19 in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. We would be particularly keen to hear if you have considered commissioning specific research in this topic and also the collection of ethnicity as part of Covid-19 testing, using the ONS 2021 Census Ethnicity Categories.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Yours sincerely,



Baroness Janet Whitaker and Kate Green MP
Co-Chairs, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Gypsies Travellers and Roma

Cc Lord Bethell, Duncan Selbie