

PLUGGED IN

Strengthening Energy Advice and Support for Gypsies,
Travellers, Roma and Nomadic Communities

CASE STUDIES

A resource prepared by National Energy Action
July 2023



Action for Warm Homes



Which?



THIS RESOURCE

This output includes three composite case studies that detail the lived experience of energy vulnerability among energy consumers that identify as a Gypsy, Traveller, Roma or belonging to a Nomadic Community (GTRNC). These case studies appear in the following project outputs:

- **Final Report – Case Studies 1, 2 and 3**
- **Executive Summary – Case Study 3**
- **Community Briefing – Case Study 2**
- **Community Co-Produced Guide – Case Study 1**

Please note that these case studies do not represent any one person's story or situation. They are composite therefore the details draw on different aspects of the many stories and situations that were shared with us in the research. Names and any other identifying information have been carefully removed from all research content and outputs, including these case studies.



CASE STUDY 1: NOMADIC LIFE IS A PHYSICAL LIFE

Jason is a dad of two boys, aged 15 and 18. His youngest is in school and his eldest works with his uncle, a local tree surgeon. As a family of three, they have moved between several different types of home over the years, living in vehicles including a double decker bus and a van. For a short period, a few years ago, they moved into a home that was bricks and mortar due to the challenges of managing the youngest son's asthma while living nomadically. However, after only a few months, they found running the home to be very expensive and that way of living to not feel right for them as a family.

Roughly seven years ago, they moved onto a local authority owned site and now live in a caravan, with access to a separate toilet and shower block. Jason's eldest son, keen to have some independence, is currently living in a smaller caravan on the same plot. The family find it incredibly difficult to heat and keep the home dry, warm, and free from damp and mould. Both caravans do not have any insulation and were not in very good condition when sold. As Jason explained, these are not spaces designed and built for all year-round living but are more like second holiday homes. However, he feels that this situation, even in a poor quality, leaky static home, is better than their previous homes in vehicles in terms of heating and repairs. Plus, this was all that Jason could afford.

The family uses a log burner as the main way to keep warm and Jason feels incredibly lucky to have a relative who is not only living on the same site, but is able, due to his job, to source wood for the family for cheap or even free on occasions. He explained that they could not afford to buy ready chopped and seasoned fire wood, or gas bottles as frequently as others on the site do.

The wood that Jason has access to needs cutting and storing which is an incredibly physical task. Jason finds this and other elements of his life as like having a part-time job on top of his full-time job working as a health and social care worker. There are constant demands in terms of heating, cleaning, and repairing the home, with all elements being very physical in nature.

Last year, Jason hurt himself falling down steps as he was trying to take laundry between the caravan and the day room. He was left with a broken leg and slipped disc in his back. Unable to work for three months, Jason only received statutory sick pay. Heading into winter at the time, Jason was not only struggling with his physical health, but saw a huge impact on his mental health, too. The bills stacked up and he found himself more in debt and owing friends and family money for essentials.

Jason relied heavily on his sons during this time, and this made him incredibly anxious and stressed. They had to help with the majority of domestic jobs, like cooking and cleaning, but also with cutting wood and building and maintaining fires, otherwise there was no source of heat. When the children were not at home, Jason used blankets, hot water bottles and extra clothing to try and keep as warm as possible while recovering. He would frequently go without food, not just to save money spent on groceries, but also to save on fuel for cooking, putting his sons needs first and a brave face on when they were around. Being cold made the pain much worse.

Jason also needed help with laundry, bathing and going to the toilet - all of which needed to be done across different units or blocks and so meant going in and out of the main part of the home repeatedly throughout the day and night. Help with personal care added particular stress on his relationship with his teenage sons. He felt embarrassed and a burden and like a bad parent for not being able to provide for or support the children. To reduce the journeys to and from the shower and toilet block, he used buckets in the main caravan.

Jason's neighbours did provide some much needed help during this time - with food in particular. Batch cooked meals were brought round, and Jason found this to be lifesaving. However, this also made him feel incredibly guilty, as he knew how much everyone was struggling with the price of food and fuel. But that's just what the community is like on sites.

This experience has made Jason realise just how vulnerable he'll be when he's older, likely without much or enough money, and without his sons at home or nearby to help with daily life when he is not as physically able or strong. He now worries a lot about those living around him who are alone and without family or a tight knit community to support during unexpected crises.





CASE STUDY 2: NOMADIC LIFE AS A SUSTAINABLE LIFE

Catherine lives with four children and her partner on a local authority owned site. They are English Gypsies and live on one of 12 plots, having moved in around 5 years ago. The other plots are occupied mostly by family members, and they love their current living arrangement. When they moved onto the plot, they made the decision to build their own small, timber framed home because they wanted to live somewhere that was more energy efficient and comfortable than previous homes, which had typically been static caravans.

Catherine has decades of experience of living off-grid as her family have lived on other sites and roadside for many years before moving onto the current site. Over the years, they've nearly always had solar panels and are currently saving up to add solar PV to their self-built home – something they're desperate to have now but can't afford. There were conversations with the council at the time the site was built but they were told that solar panels were too expensive to add and so these never appeared.

In building the current home, Catherine and her partner have done nearly all of the work themselves, despite not being professional builders or tradespeople. They've spent many hours over the last few years researching the best techniques and materials for building the most sustainable and energy efficient home. This has included how best to insulate and ventilate the home, what heating system to install, and how to save and reuse water. For some parts of the work, Catherine has had contact with local organisations who put on DIY workshops – with some of these online during the pandemic - for repair and renovation projects. She's found these incredibly valuable, and they've given her the confidence to try something new herself.

There are lots of ways in which Catherine, her family and her neighbours are living sustainable lives. This seems like second nature to them and just how they've always lived. Low impact, low demand, low waste, and low cost wherever possible. A simple, slower, more minimalist way of living – all things that make their way of life so appealing. In terms of the things they do, in winter, for example, the family wear lots of layers to keep warm and to reduce the amount of laundry they need to do, they mostly follow a vegetarian diet, and they're very conscious of plastic use and waste. On the site, the family are able to grow their own food, and this is a part of living at a fixed address that Catherine is particularly happy about. Cooking frequently happens communally across the site as this reduces cost, waste, and energy use. Catherine described this as the norm, particularly during the summer months, where families and households across the whole site will chip in to make meals for everyone.

With Catherine's experience of building and repairing the home and living with a fairly low energy demand for many years, she feels upset that there aren't more schemes to help support this way of living, or more opportunities to learn from the expertise of different nomadic communities. For example, when the site was being developed, Catherine remembers a lot of consultations with the local authority – with tea and coffee and sandwiches – where many hours were spent discussing needs and hopes, including things like allotments, compost toilets, solar panels, and so on. However, almost all of these points were overlooked in the final design of the site, and families like Catherine's had since spent years either doing it for themselves or campaigning for change.





CASE STUDY 3: NOMADIC LIFE OVERLOOKED BY POLICY

Celeste lives alone on a boat she purchased just over five years ago. She describes herself as a Boater but says that lifestyle is still very new to her and that her family don't really understand her choice of home and way of life. She has not seen her parents for a few years but says this is also because of the pandemic and how much work she has needed to do to renovate the boat.

This is Celeste's first home that isn't bricks and mortar. Prior to this she was living in unaffordable private rented houses and also spent time in between tenancies sofa surfing with friends. Celeste had friends who'd lived on boats for years and felt that their daily life was really appealing in terms of pace and connection to others and nature. After finding a boat in desperate need of repair, Celeste took out a bank loan and started work on her new home.

Celeste quickly found there are few if any schemes specifically designed to help Boaters improve the quality and thermal efficiency of their home. She says that she frequently gets calls to her mobile from companies trying to sell solar panels or heat pumps and will often sarcastically play along knowing that as soon as she tells them she lives on a boat they will end the conversation. Celeste has done research online and spoken with her local authority but is stuck with what to do next, other than slowly save any money she can to make modest and less impactful changes to her home.

Celeste is self-employed working as a freelance artist and photographer. Her income fluctuates and this means she regularly uses a credit card to pay for essentials like food and fuel, especially at the end of the month. She heats and powers the boat using a log burner, but often runs out of wood and struggles to keep warm enough. Winter is hard, especially the most recent one through the energy crisis and Celeste has had to burn books and some wooden furniture for heat on the coldest days. Things have been bad for the whole of the local boating community around Celeste, and even a service that provides coal and wood by boat has been as struggling and forced to reduce hours and supply.

Celeste has solar panels and battery storage, which she had to take out a loan to pay for but says that they aren't great. She has often run out of charge for her laptop and phone which means she can't do her job in the evenings. She would love to buy a generator but doesn't have the money for this at the moment and explained that having a generator on a boat puts you at risk of theft, which makes her really nervous living alone.

Celeste was diagnosed with ADHD last year and also lives with anxiety. Celeste needs to make her day-to-day life as simple as possible, breaking things down into manageable steps in order to manage her health and wellbeing. Managing life on the boat is in many ways more complex than in a house and this can make managing her health quite difficult. However, fear of mounting debts and bailiffs is enough to keep her too nervous to return to bricks and mortar right now.

Celeste does not have a mooring license and is classed as a continuous cruiser. This means she has to move her boat every two weeks. Because of this status, Celeste was not eligible for the Government's energy crisis support scheme. She has made numerous attempts to try and access the alternative scheme for those who use coal, wood, and gas bottles, but has been asked for proof of purchase of fuels and other paperwork she simply didn't keep because she did not know they would be needed down the line. Celeste is confident at using the internet and used to volunteer for a frontline service that helped local residents with form-filing; she feels that if she can't navigate the complexity of policy like this, then it must be impossible for those who may have additional needs or challenges, like language barriers, digital exclusion, or not being able to read and write.

Celeste really wants to persevere with living on a boat but thinks that she may have to give up this way of life if things don't improve or more help isn't made available.



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