

PLUGGED IN

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

COMMUNITY BRIEFING

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A resource prepared by National Energy Action
July 2023



Action for Warm Homes



**FRIENDS,
FAMILIES &
TRAVELLERS**

Which?



THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO HELPED WITH THIS PROJECT

We want to thank the hundreds of Gypsies, Travellers, Roma, and other people who identify as living in a Nomadic Community (e.g., Boaters, Bargees) (GTRNC) for their incredibly generous involvement – to those who completed the survey, took part in interviews, completed diaries, and came to participate at the in-person at the workshops.

We are also very grateful to the many services and organisations who so generously found time to contribute to the research, particularly at a time when your services are so critically stretched and so vitally needed.

Without these valuable insights of lived and professional experience we would not have been able to complete the research. Thanks also to Friends, Families, Travellers for expert partnership and valuable guidance in developing the research and support with completing the fieldwork.

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WHAT IS THIS DOCUMENT?

This document is a short summary of the project and some of the main findings. Everything in this document comes from the questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and workshops that National Energy Action and Friends, Families, and Travellers completed with households that include people who are Gypsy, Traveller, Roma or belonging to a Nomadic Community (GTRNC), and the people from organisations that work with these communities.



WHAT DID WE WANT TO LEARN ABOUT?

We know that Gypsies, Travellers, Roma, and other people who live nomadic lives or as part of nomadic communities (e.g., Boaters, Bargees, etc.) (GTRNC) have not always had the same level of support and attention as other energy consumers.

Many households from these different communities are experiencing ‘fuel poverty’ - a situation where it is difficult to afford or access enough energy or fuel for good health, comfort, and wellbeing. This brings many challenges with heating, cooking, cleaning, and powering the home as well as staying healthy and happy.

National Energy Action has worked with Friends, Families and Travellers to understand the challenges that different communities face in keeping warm, well, safe, and happy at home. We also wanted to understand how we can all work together to make advice and support better.

We spoke to hundreds of households and organisations to try and understand:

- How is fuel poverty experienced by Gypsies, Travellers, Roma, and other people who live nomadic lives or as part of nomadic communities (e.g., Boaters, Bargees, etc.) (GTRNC) and how do these different communities access support?
- What does good or effective support look like?
- What gaps in support and services exist? How can we make changes to support people from these different communities better?
- How has Covid-19, the cost-of-living crisis, and the energy price crisis had an impact on fuel poverty and support for these different communities?



CASE STUDY: 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.

WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

- More than 70% of households told us that **energy/fuel was unaffordable and that they were struggling**; 42% were able to 'just about manage', 23% are finding costs 'quite difficult' and 9% finding costs '*very difficult*'
- 80% of households were **turning the heating off to save money**, with 51% doing this 'all of the time' or 'some of the time'
- 83% were **using coats, blankets, and extra clothes to stay warm**, with 59% doing this 'all of the time' or 'some of the time'.
- Many households and organisations talked about the 'heat or eat' dilemma where a household is having to choose between heating or eating because they do not have enough money to pay for both.
 - 88% of organisations and services told us that they had seen **increases in people going without food**
 - 63% of households told us they were **going without meals**, with 36% doing this '*all of the time*' or '*some of the time*'
 - 73% of households told us they were **cooking less to save energy**, with 44% doing this '*all of the time*' or '*some of the time*'

- 66% of households told us they were **eating cold meals** to save energy, with 39% doing this ‘*all of the time*’ or ‘*some of the time*’
- 68% of households told us they were **eating less healthy food to save money**, with 36% doing this ‘*all of the time*’ or ‘*some of the time*’.
- Doing laundry, cleaning the home, and showering/bathing were also parts of everyday life that were more difficult because of money.
 - 80% of organisations and services told us that they had seen increases in **people going without or negotiating clothing purchases against other essentials**
 - 63% of organisations and services told us that they had seen increases in **people going without or negotiating energy or items for personal hygiene, such as having a hot shower or bath**
 - 50% of organisations and services told us that they had seen increases in **people sharing certain jobs like laundry across different households**
 - 69% of households told us they were **going without ‘other’ essentials such as toiletries**, with 46% doing this ‘*all of the time*’ or ‘*some of the time*’.

Paying for Energy

- 43% of households told us told us that they either find it **difficult (36%) or are unable (7%) to keep their homes warm and comfortable when it is cold outside**
- There were a number of reasons why it was difficult or impossible, such as the cost of energy/fuel (35%) and broken heating systems (48%)
- 61% of households told us told us that they have **borrowed money to pay for energy/fuel in the last 12 months**, with 29% reporting that they had needed to do this ‘*lots of times*’.



Prepayment meters and smart meters

- 43% of households paid by prepayment meter (PPM) and **self-disconnection was a serious concern**
- Some householders wanted to switch from a PPM to a credit meter to give them more choice over tariff and supplier, but they had been refused by energy suppliers
- Households also talked about forced installations of a PPM by energy suppliers because of energy debt
- Some households pay the local authority or site manager for energy, with them acting as ‘brokers’ and providing what was once cheaper commercial rates
- For households where the local authority is a broker, some are having to travel to or contact the local authority to top up their PPM. For many, remote top-up was not an option, and sometimes, top-up was even not possible outside of office hours meaning that households who ran out of energy on the PPM on a Friday could not access a top-up until Monday morning

Health

- **Almost three quarters of people told us they had one or more health condition or were living with a disability.** The most common health problems were respiratory/breathing conditions. 19% were living with depression and 17% with anxiety
- Parents told us about the **challenging day-to-day experiences of supporting children with complex needs** because of health issues and disabilities. For these parents, energy and fuel were essential for things like hot water and television which were important parts of routines, for example with children who are living with autism
- Unexpected health problems, such as a broken leg or bad back, were also big worries. **People told us about how physical nomadic life is.** For example, at home this could involve cutting and sourcing wood to cook and stay warm, as

well as needing to walk to shower blocks or to use toilets. Outside of the home, employment also often heavily relied on being physically well and mobile

- 42% of households told us **their home affected their health ‘in a bad way’**, because their home was **too expensive, too cold, too warm, too difficult to keep safe, and damp and mouldy**
- For those that felt their home had a positive impact on health, this was because of the connection to their family and friends and nature that nomadic life (for example on a boat) offered.

Damp and mould

- 63% of households have damp and mould in their homes.
- People do lots of different things to try and deal with damp and mould, such as:
 - opening windows
 - washing windows and surfaces
 - using a dehumidifier
 - painting and decorating

Safety and security

- Some households, in particular Boaters and those living roadside, felt at risk of harm in terms of being ‘targets’ for theft with items such as generators. This stopped some from buying equipment which could improve levels of comfort and warmth at home.

Types of energy-related problems

- 43% have had an **issue with an energy supplier**
- 49% have had an **issue with a housing provider about energy/fuel**
- 25% have had **issues with neighbours about energy/fuel**
- 25% have had **issues with a site manager about energy/fuel**
- 40% have had **issues with a broken gas or electricity meter**
- 10% have had **issues with a broken top-up key/card for a PPM.**

KEY BARRIERS TO PROVIDING EFFECTIVE SUPPORT

- Services need more staff and more time to support all the people that need help
- People are experiencing very poor customer service from energy suppliers
- There are lots of challenges and opportunities for online support and tackling digital exclusion
- There are lots of people who have trouble with language barriers
- There are lots of people who have trouble with literacy and numeracy barriers
- There are a lot of problems with trust, stigma, and experiences of discrimination
- There are no schemes available to people living nomadically (for example, on sites or boats) to improve energy efficiency





Where do households go to for help keeping warm and well at home?

- Family, friends, and neighbours (44%)
- Local organisation/charity (43%)
- Council/local authority (34%)
- Landlord (27%)

What types of support?

- More than **seven out of ten households had received some form of energy-related support**
- Half of those who had received some type of support had received a winter warmth pack
- Nearly one in three of those who received support also reported having had help with access to grants, fuel vouchers, energy saving advice, and access to energy efficiency measures
- More than **75% of households were aware of the Priority Services Register (PSR)¹** which is a service to make sure vulnerable energy consumers have extra support. However, nearly one in four was not aware of the PSR and this highlights that we need to make sure that all energy consumers are aware of extra help.

Policy and government support

- **43% of households had not received any money from government schemes to help with energy/fuel costs during the energy crisis**
- For Boaters, the issue related to whether or not they were classified as a ‘continuous cruiser’, and if they were, this meant they were not eligible for support under the government’s energy crisis support package. This was described as an incredibly unfair process

¹ The Priority Services Register (the PSR) is a service in place to help “...energy companies, including energy suppliers, electricity and gas networks like us to look after customers who have extra communication, access or safety needs”. Details on the PSR can be found: <https://www.thepsr.co.uk/>

- People told us there is a need to review Government policy (for example the Alternative Fuel Payment scheme) and how it might be excluding GTRNCs. They also told us that there is a need for Government and the industry to commit to changes where they are needed to make sure future policy is fair and avoids past mistakes.

Energy supplier relationship and contact

- There are lots of **problems contacting energy suppliers**
- Wait times to get through to a call centre are too long, too expensive, and very stressful
- People want to be able to contact a person, and preferably the same person, and not an automated service (“a robot”)
- People told us that it would be helpful to have records from calls so any promised or agreed actions are written down. This would allow people to see what was agreed and also talk to others, like family or local charities, if they needed extra help reading, replying, or understanding what was said on the call.

Online support and digital exclusion

- **Online support was seen as a good thing and a bad thing**
- 92% of organisations and services told us that **digital exclusion was a barrier to providing effective support**
- 9% of households used the internet but were not confident
- 6% were not using the internet but would like to
- Online support through Facebook messenger and WhatsApp was seen as a good thing. People told us they could share pictures of letters and documents, and this meant they could get help faster and without having to travel.

Literacy and numeracy

- People told us that **paperwork and documents, for example energy bills, were too complicated**, especially for those unable to read or write. Family, friends and neighbours regularly helped those who were unable to read and write with household bills and important paperwork
- People told us that all documents, like energy bills must be designed in an accessible way, with access to Easy Read and audio resources.

Trust and discrimination

- People shared lots of examples of bad experiences with energy suppliers and housing providers, as well as other organisations and bodies, that made them feel like they couldn't trust them
- **People shared lots of examples of how they have experienced discrimination in their everyday lives**, including energy suppliers refusing supply, children not being invited to social events, postal workers not delivering post, among others. Staff working for services to support GTRNCs also told of similar experiences among their client groups and highlighted the importance of and need for more cultural awareness training across a wide range of sectors
- People told us that they were **worried about asking for help or being vulnerable and this triggering follow-on action or onward referrals/reporting** to places like social services. This was described as a barrier to reaching out for help when needed.

HOW CAN SUPPORT BE IMPROVED?

- **Services told us that more in-person support is needed**
- **They also told us that more financial support is needed for local services so they can help more people**
- **Services need more staff and volunteers to meet demand**
- **Households told us that it is not appropriate to refer to them as 'hard-to-reach people', as it is actually 'hard-to-reach services'**
- **People told us there is a need for more training for services, organisations and bodies that do not regularly or effectively support GTRNCs. This will help different services and organisations to better understand the lives and needs of different communities, for example in learning through cultural awareness and/or energy training.**

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

We asked the communities and the organisations that work with them what needs to change. This is what some people told us:

This is my understanding for policymakers to actually understand that we exist. And understanding that not everybody is black and white and fits into little boxes. And understanding that we are taxpayers, we are voters.

We need more resources to be able to support people. Because there's not enough of us and there's a lot of work to do. So yes, more resources need to come, from one way or another... And I think funding us lot is probably easier than societal change, it seems.

Apart from any new build housing or any new build site, any new, anything, we've got the technology, the wherewithal and all the know-how to make completely energy efficient homes, carbon neutral homes that have got south facing, solar and all the bells and whistles. Why isn't there legislation in place that says every single new build has to take in consideration first of all the climate and climate change? It's got to be at the front of all policies, surely.

RECOMMENDATIONS

National Energy Action has set out a number of recommendations for changes that are needed to make energy advice and support more effective for Gypsies, Travellers, Roma, and people living in Nomadic Communities. This needs action from different people such as the government, the energy regulator, energy suppliers and the energy industry, and services that support people with energy problems.

The full list of recommendations can be found in the main report but cover:

- **Ways to improve the design and delivery of services – for example, through training, awareness raising, etc**
- **Ways to improve communication with households and protections for when things go wrong - for example, by improving the experiences of customer contact centres, call logs, caseworkers, etc**
- **Ways to improve visibility and inclusivity – for example, by working with the communities better to understand challenges and design services and support**
- **Ways to reduce fuel poverty risk and access to advice and support – for example, through specialist advice provision, reviews of what energy efficiency and retrofit schemes exist for the different communities, and financial and debt support.**

MORE INFORMATION

This resource is part of the *Plugged In: Strengthening Energy Advice and Support for Gypsies, Travellers, Roma and Nomadic Communities project*. The project was led by National Energy Action working with Friends, Families, Travellers and supported by the Which? Fund.

You can find more information about the project and find related outputs on National Energy Action's website [insert weblink for electronic document]. Related outputs include:

- **Executive summary**
- **Final Report**
- **Case Studies**
- **Community Co-Produced Guidance Document**

Please contact researchteam@nea.org.uk for further information.

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