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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A report by National Energy Action



Action for Warm Homes



FRIENDS,
FAMILIES &
TRAVELLERS

Which?

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OVERVIEW

Gypsies, Travellers, Roma, and other people who identify as belonging to a Nomadic Community (e.g., Boaters, Bargees, etc.) (GTRNC)¹ are a consumer group regarded as overlooked, under-served by policy, and under-researched, yet evidence tells us these different communities experience manifold vulnerabilities and heightened risk of harm. This is also the case with fuel poverty – a situation in which a household cannot adequately afford or access sufficient energy for good health, comfort, and wellbeing.

Whilst this research emphasises that GTRNCs are not a single homogenous group living and experiencing energy and related vulnerability in the same way, there are some commonalities. This can include difficulties with access to energy via less common arrangements with little-to-no choice over supplier and fuel type, discrimination, limited consumer protections, disproportionately more expensive bills, and little choice over cleaner and/or cheaper sources of energy. GTRNC households are also exposed to increased risk through use of faulty and dangerous heating and cooking systems, exposure to poor air quality and increased CO risk. Further, data on access to and take-up of vital schemes, such as the Warm Home Discount (WHD), the Energy Company Obligation (ECO), and the Priority Services Register (PSR), for example, is particularly limited.

This research was undertaken during the height of the cost-of-living and energy price crises in 2022-2023. Data was, therefore, gathered before, during, and after the significant package of government support was in place. As we know, hundreds of thousands of households, with two key groups being those living in park homes and on boats, were refused or excluded from this essential support. This analysis includes some of the experiences and reflections of these households, and others, such as those living roadside and on sites.

At a time when the UK is experiencing cost-of-living and energy crises, and consumer service and protections are under scrutiny, incomes strained, and public health severely impacted, it is vital to examine how the most vulnerable and marginalised groups of consumers can be best included and supported.

¹ The term Gypsies, Travellers, Roma, and other people who identify as belonging to a Nomadic Community (GTRNC) is a broad term adopted in this project to encompass a wide range of demographic, ethnic, and community groups. It includes several different and distinctive ways in which people may identify, with the main commonality being a link, practically and/or culturally, to nomadic life.

CASE STUDY: 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. This is Celeste's first home that isn't bricks and mortar and 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.

Celeste quickly found there are few if any schemes specifically designed to help Boaters improve the thermal efficiency of their home. She says that she frequently gets calls to her mobile with 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 she regularly uses a credit card to pay for essentials like food and fuel. 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.

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 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 can't access. Celeste is confident at using the internet and used to volunteer for a frontline service that helped local residents with form-filling; 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 barrier, digital exclusion, or not being able to read and write.

KEY FINDINGS: THE EXPERIENCE OF ENERGY VULNERABILITY

Types of energy-related problems experienced by surveyed GTRNCs

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 pre-payment meter (PPM)



Energy Vulnerability

Energy vulnerability was common among GTRNCs that participated in this research, with a large majority (70%) struggling to afford the energy they needed to stay warm and well at home. Extreme coping strategies, such as rationing heat (81%) were commonplace and brought about a complex trade-off between heating the home and other essentials, such as eating warm and healthy meals, often referred to as the 'eat or heat' trade-off. But in reality, the trade-offs are much more complex and extend beyond just eating. They include the nutritional quality of food, whether meals are warm or cold and introduce heavily and consistently negotiated management of budgets and daily practices, particularly those that involve energy use, such as laundry and personal hygiene.

Paying for Energy

Unsurprisingly, given that the last year has seen a doubling in energy prices, paying for energy is incredibly difficult for GTRNC households and many are finding it hard or are unable to heat their homes. More than half (61%) had borrowed money to pay for energy or fuel in the last 12 months, with nearly one in three needing to do this frequently. Relatedly, energy debts were a significant issue.

Of particular concern are GTRNC households paying for energy via a PPM, where instances of self-disconnection are common. Also concerning were experiences of forced PPM installations and refusals by energy suppliers to switch to credit meters. Smart meters may offer a solution to reducing vulnerability and the complexity of managing energy supply for some households, and while the majority of respondents reported having a smart meter there were still one in five that did not.

Paying for energy is often more complex for GTRNC households where it is common for energy to be supplied via a broker, a role typically held by the local authority or the site owner/manager. Notably, key issues include a lack of transparency over how energy costs are calculated under such arrangements and the exclusion of households from support such as the Energy Bills Support Scheme (EBSS). Access to affordable alternative fuels, such as gas bottles and wood, are also a major challenge for GTRNCs.

Health

Households were generally positive about their health, despite around three quarters (74%) having one or more health conditions or living with a disability. The most common conditions reported included respiratory/breathing conditions and mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. This adds to the established evidence on the links between such conditions and cold homes. Less well-understood or examined, but important to highlight are more specific health issues relating to the day-to-day experiences of parents supporting children with complex or additional needs. Specifically, there is little awareness of acceptance of certain energy needs relating to health conditions and the use of electrical equipment, where the predominant focus has been on aspects such as electrically powered medical equipment such as electric wheelchairs or dialysis machines. However, the research has highlighted other energy-uses associated with managing health that are less well understood or overlooked, for example, use of the television for calming a child with Autism.

Nomadic life was also described as a very physical life and where health affected the ability to undertake everyday tasks, such as chopping wood, households faced increased vulnerability and dependency on family members and neighbours.

Home was seen to impact both negatively and positively on people's health. In a negative way, the home was perceived as being too cold, costly, and difficult to keep safe and in good repair. For those that felt their home had a positive impact on health, this was because of the connection to others and nature that nomadic life (for example on a boat) offered.

Security and dwelling condition

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 purchasing such equipment which could improve levels of comfort and warmth at home.

In terms of dwelling condition, nearly one in five (19%) respondents were unhappy with the condition of their home. Repairs and maintenance costs were noted as reasons, as well as a lack of amenities (i.e., running water) and the presence of damp and mould. A staggering sixty-three per cent reported damp/mould in their homes, a figure far higher than average of 3.8% of all dwelling according to the English Housing Survey data. This data adds to the evidence that certain subsets of the population, including those on the lowest incomes and from ethnic backgrounds, are disproportionately living in homes with damp/mould. Households are engaging in a range of behaviours to try and remedy the issues including costly decorating, cleaning, and use of equipment such dehumidifiers. What causes damp/mould and who is responsible for remedying the issue is contested, with there being disagreement on the extent to which household behaviours, housing quality and ventilation, and energy costs and access to support are at play.

Social ties and community connection

There was a strong sense of community, and this was by far the biggest indicator of whether or not a household was considered more or less vulnerable: those with strong ties with and close connections to neighbours and family and friends were regarded as less at risk and more supported and protected; those without, were regarded as among the most vulnerable and marginalised. Experiences of energy vulnerability were minimised by strong social ties, but maintaining these relationships was also threatened by such circumstances. For example, 59% of CFE respondents had seen increases in the numbers of their clients and service users minimising social interactions because of energy and other household costs.





KEY FINDINGS: ENERGY-RELATED ADVICE AND SUPPORT

Getting support

GTRNC households get advice and support on keeping warm and well at home from a range of formal and informal sources, with family, friends, and neighbours (44%) and a local organisations and charities (43%) the most common and preferred sources. More than two out of three households (70%) had received some form of energy-related support, typically from a local organisation or charity, and this included winter warmth packs, fuel vouchers, energy saving advice, and access to grants and energy efficiency measures.

Providing such support, particularly during winter months and during the energy crisis, has been very challenging. Notable concerns and key challenges include worries over limited resources (e.g., winter warmth crisis packs) against rapid rises in demand as well as additional steps with paperwork and applications that GTRNC households seem to be required to take to access support.

Nearly one in four GTRNC households surveyed were not aware of the PSR and this highlights that further efforts are needed to ensure that all energy consumers are aware of extra help. Key barriers to providing effective support.

Several barriers to providing effective support were identified, including:

- **Energy supplier relationship and contact.** The relationship with energy suppliers and the capacity to contact and communicate clearly with the customer contact centres is a major barrier. Wait times to get through to a call centre are too long, often too costly, and very stressful. This causes distress and frustration due to the complexity of wait times, having to repeat circumstances multiple times, being passed between multiple call handlers, and at times, feeling discriminated against. Contact with a person and not an automated service is perceived as essential. Households pointed to a need for accessible records of calls with energy suppliers and any actions logged – not just for GTRNCs, but for a wide range of marginalised and/or vulnerable groups.
- **Online support and digital exclusion.** The provision of support online has both positive and negative factors. For services, digital exclusion is a key challenge to providing effective support and reaching the most vulnerable people. One in four households were either using the internet but were not confident in doing so (19%) or not using the internet but would like to (6%). Online support did present opportunities, however. For example, use of Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp has been very successful for some services, particularly during the pandemic. These avenues have allowed households to access help remotely and share pictures of letters and other documents to make advice and support in a simpler and quicker way. While this will not work for everyone, it highlights the potential of online methods in terms of delivering the most effective energy-related advice and support.

- **Language barriers.** Language barriers were identified as a key issue with 42% of CFE respondents reporting this impacted their capacity to provide effective support.
- **Health as a barrier.** Health, particularly mental health, which is disproportionately experienced by GTRNCs, was also noted as a barrier. There is limited capacity to deal with complex problems while also managing day-to-day health issues, often in combination with other barriers and markers of vulnerability. Key health issues noted included Autism and ADHD, and the findings highlight that energy-related and other support is not yet tailored in a way that works for people with these health conditions.
- **Literacy and numeracy.** Levels of literacy and numeracy are also regarded as a significant barrier among GTRNC populations. The design of paperwork and documents, for example with energy bills, is unnecessarily complex, and regarded as intimidating for those unable to read or write. All energy-related advice and support resources must be accessible, with access to Easy Read and 'audio' versions.
- **Trust and discrimination.** Trust, stigma, and the experiences of discrimination are major concerns and barriers to providing effective energy-related advice and support to GTRNCs. Poor past experiences of support and discrimination with suppliers, housing providers, health professionals, and others, has led to high levels of mistrust. To address this issue, there is a need for more cultural awareness training and focused efforts to support and remedy where discrimination has occurred.
- **Lack of schemes.** There is a distinct lack of energy efficiency schemes available to GTRNCs not living in bricks and mortar. Several stakeholders and householders highlighted how such grants and schemes were almost non-existent or extremely difficult to access.



What Needs to Change?

Ways to improve support:

- In terms of delivery, more in-person support is needed, as well as more financial support for households and services that support them, and more staff/volunteers.
- Establishing and maintaining relationships across networks of services and organisations, especially since Covid-19, is critically important.
- There is a need to consider how appropriate it is to refer to vulnerable and/or marginalised groups as 'hard-to-reach' as it was argued that it is services and schemes, not people, that are 'hard-to-reach'.
- There is a need for services, organisations and bodies that do not routinely or effectively support GTRNCs to take steps to better understand the lives and needs of such communities, for example in learning through cultural awareness and/or energy-specific training.

Ways to improve Policy, Regulation and Government support:

- There is a need to review how existing energy and fuel poverty policy may exclude GTRNCs, and commitment to identify appropriate procedures to ensure future policy can avoid the same mistakes.
- 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.

HOUSEHOLDER AND STAKEHOLDER VIEWS

As part of the research, householders and stakeholders were asked what changes they felt were needed – in policy and practice - to ensure that energy-related advice and support could be most effective. Foregrounding these views and voices, below are some of the examples of their responses:

Yes, and one day retrofit. They could be pretty much off grid. They could have solar roofs. They could have ground ... ground source heat pumps. The technology is all there. It might be more expensive to build these things, but it's that principle, isn't it, of investing straight off so that things are cheaper to run from then on. Regarding our site, we're on the top of quite a windy hill. Why was there not thought on the roofs little buildings we've got, the utility buildings, why wasn't there solar from the outset? Why is there not a community wind generator? The infrastructure for that has to be thought of from the outset. These things are quite difficult to retrofit, aren't they? It's just putting that at the front of any design. To me it's just madness that it's not a priority consideration, but there you go.

This is my understanding for policy makers 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 knowhow 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.

I think just a fairer deal in terms of where people get their electricity from on sites. It just seems really unfair. It was unfair, anyway, that people... You move onto site and then you're told, "Right, you're on a meter, here is your tariff, this is your provider." You've got no choice in that, you're stuck with it. So, you've got that, which is unfair. Anyone else, who lives in a house, can choose their provider, and make some informed choices, but people living on site have got no choice.



RECOMMENDATIONS

This section offers a number of recommendations based on the findings of this research and testimony of key stakeholders and GTRNC households themselves.

1. Reduced fuel poverty risk and greater access to energy-related advice and support

- Government should undertake an urgent review of the energy efficiency schemes available to households who do not live in bricks and mortar. A review and gap-analysis of current provision of relevant schemes and interventions specifically for GTRNCs is needed. Where schemes and services exist, a programme of awareness raising and targeting should be implanted.
- Policy mechanisms and interventions, especially those that are described as ‘universal’ (e.g., EBSS) or to meet a gap in provision (e.g., Alternative Fuel Payment), must be more fully scrutinised by Ofgem prior to implementation to ensure they are fit-for-purpose for all consumers/recipients, including marginalised and/or vulnerable communities, such as GTRNC.
- Targeted and bespoke training (for energy and cultural awareness) is needed to equip non-specialist services and organisations in providing appropriate and effective support to GTRNCs around energy-related issues. This could include fire safety teams, schools, housing providers, etc.

2. Improved consumer protections and communication

- Government must work with the energy industry and Ofgem to identify where discrimination is being experienced by GTRNCs specifically in their experiences as energy consumers. Targeted action and support are required.
- Ofgem should work with the energy industry to introduce minimum standards for customer service to reduce call waiting times in the energy industry.
- Ofgem should work with the energy industry to establish minimum standards and formats for inclusive and accessible communication with consumers from all communities. This should consider literacy, numeracy, and language barriers.

3. Greater visibility and inclusivity

- A cross-utility review is needed to explore where GTRNC have been excluded from utility-related policy and plan of action against recommendations is needed.
- Government should urgently review which GTRNC households have not yet received any energy crisis related support and ensure there is a mechanism in place for households to access this support as soon as possible.

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