

Assisting Gypsies and Travellers during the COVID-19 crisis

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Chartered
Institute of
Housing

Coronavirus (Covid-19) is causing significant disruption across the country and may be particularly worrying to Gypsies and Travellers. This brief guide offers advice on assisting Gypsies and Travellers and links to more detailed sources that may also be useful. It focuses on Gypsies and Travellers living on sites: those living in social rented accommodation are likely to have similar issues to other tenants, including vulnerability because of age, etc.

Thirty organisations in England [wrote to the Westminster government on March 24](#) with various demands about the needs of Gypsies and Travellers in the current crisis, including putting a halt to evictions of unauthorised encampments. Government advice has fallen short of this. Letters to local authorities [in April and November 2020](#) emphasised health issues and points like ensuring water supplies are adequate..

The Scottish Government issued excellent [detailed guidance](#) which has many points that are useful across the UK.

Avoiding evictions

It is vitally important that local authorities avoid evictions from unauthorised sites during the crisis period, as this can endanger both Gypsies and Travellers and the wider community. The only exception is where a move will allow site occupants to be in a place that is safer for their families (e.g. has a good water supply to allow regular handwashing).

Police chiefs have asked UK police forces to consider other options than eviction when working with unauthorised sites. A [letter to chief police officers](#) spells out the risks for Gypsies and Travellers and refers to the option of [negotiated stopping](#) which is used in some areas. A recent [report](#) from London Gypsies and Travellers includes further guidance on negotiated stopping approaches.

Helping people in unauthorised encampments

Obviously, the challenges of preventive action and dealing with likely infection are greater in unauthorised encampments. As well as avoiding eviction (unless this provides a better and safer alternative for those in the encampment),

councils and voluntary bodies can help by following [guidance](#) provided by Friends Families and Travellers.

The Scottish Government advises local authorities to install temporary rubbish disposal, washing and toilet facilities where possible.

Ensuring adequate facilities on existing sites

The government's April [letter to English local authorities](#) says that access to basic facilities is essential. It goes on to say that:

"This might involve the provision of additional temporary water, sanitation and waste disposal facilities to those currently lacking access to these, or making alternative stopping places available, such as transit sites, suitable local authority land, and holiday campsites which may have closed and have established facilities."

However, the letter makes no mention of extra funding beyond the additional finance already made available to authorities, and it does not mention the issue of unauthorised sites.

Guidance for:

- England
- Scotland
- Wales
- Northern Ireland

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Friends, Families and Travellers [commented that](#), in contrast, the letters from Scottish and Welsh Governments “gave clear instructions on halting evictions and went into more detail on the support local authorities should be offering at this time.”

Importance of Gypsy and Traveller sites

Equally obviously, at a time like this, secure sites that are well-managed and with good local communications strategies about them are vital. Councils and housing associations are urged to not to abandon any plans they may have to establish sites, even if work is now delayed. The case for them and proven good practice about providing and running sites can be found in our 2016 report, [Managing and delivering Gypsy and Traveller sites: negotiating conflict](#).

General advice on COVID-19 for the Gypsy and Traveller community

The Travellers' Times has a number of [straightforward videos](#) answering questions like “How do we know if we have caught the virus?” and “Is the government doing anything to help us in particular?”.

New rules from November 2020

Information on the new national restrictions that came into force on November 5 can be found [here](#). An [easy to read version](#) is also available.

Rules about “social distancing” do of course apply equally to Gypsy and Traveller communities. The Traveller Movement has a [good video](#) on its importance and Leeds GATE has [guidance](#) about it.

If schools are closed during the crisis, Leeds Gate has [a video](#) explaining what this means. The Traveller Movement has a [page of resources](#) on Covid-19 issues including school meals and vouchers, and tutoring schemes for children who miss school.

Domestic violence

Domestic abuse has become serious as people are confined at home. Victims may not be receiving the help they need, according to [a letter signed by 22 organisations](#). Even as the risk of domestic violence increases, refuges may either be full or may turn away migrant women with no access to public funds. [Covid 19 guidance](#) is provided by the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance. The Traveller Movement has a [specific guidance leaflet](#).

Attending funerals

To stop the spread of the virus, the government has limited attendances at funerals to a maximum of 30 people, with social distancing measures being used.

Funerals can now be held in a church or at the graveside or at a crematorium. However, it will also be possible to celebrate a memorial mass later, when congregations are allowed to gather again.

The Traveller Movement has [guidance](#) on funerals, updated in November 2020.

Claiming benefits

Various changes have been made to the benefits system that affect Gypsies and Travellers. CIH has published [general guidance](#) which is regularly updated. The Traveller Movement has specific leaflets for Gypsies and Travellers on [universal credit](#) and [help for the self-employed](#).

Sustaining good practice - beyond the Covid-19 crisis

The impact of the measures to respond to Covid-19 is already teaching us much about where we should be redesigning social policy for a better future. The suspension of evictions and move-on, for example, should provide evidence that there is another way – that negotiated stopping and increased site provision provide better accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers and more cohesive communities for everyone.