



## Public Services Committee

### Uncorrected oral evidence: Access to public services for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities

Wednesday 2 February 2022

3 pm

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Members present: Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top (The Chair); Lord Bichard; Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth; Lord Davies of Gower; Lord Filkin; Baroness Pitkeathley; Lord Porter of Spalding; Baroness Sater; Lord Willis of Knaresborough.

Evidence Session No. 1

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 1 - 6

### Witnesses

**I:** Josie O'Driscoll, Chief Officer, GATE Herts; Mihai Călin Bica, Campaigning and Policy Worker, Roma Support Group; Billy Welch, Head Gypsy; Bill Lloyd, Gypsy and Traveller Representative, Appleby Horse Fair.

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## Examination of witnesses

Josie O'Driscoll, Mihai Călin Bica, Billy Welch and Bill Lloyd.

Q1 **The Chair:** Welcome to this meeting of the House of Lords Public Services Committee. We are looking this afternoon at access to public services for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. In the first half we will talk and listen to members and representatives of those communities. The second part of the afternoon is more with people who have been doing research and other things with the communities, and have been collecting data and can tell us more about that.

Can I welcome you to the first half of the committee? Some members of the committee, like you, are virtual, and other members of the committee are here around the horseshoe. People will ask questions and there will be supplementary questions too. We want to get to what you have learned over the pandemic about services and access to them, whether you think anything works well, and whether anything has been neglected that you would like us to highlight, talk about and do something about.

In this first session, we have Josie O'Driscoll, Chief Officer of GATEHerts; Mihai Călin Bica, Campaign and Policy Worker for the Roma Support Group; Billy Welch, Head Gypsy; and Bill Lloyd, Gypsy and Traveller representative for Appleby Horse Fair. The last two are compatriots of mine, because I come from County Durham. They both know County Durham and I know Appleby quite well too. Welcome this afternoon.

It is my job to start the questioning. Over the years, we have heard a lot, and there have been lots of reports, about inequalities that the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities face in accessing public services. We believe, and there are reports, that Covid-19 has increased these inequalities. I want to ask you how you see the situation now, after the two years of the pandemic.

**Josie O'Driscoll:** There is a broad range of reasons why Gypsies and Travellers cannot access services. We have seen the stark inequalities faced by Gypsies and Travellers throughout the pandemic period, such as not being able to get basic human rights like water and sanitation on sites. We are self-sufficient, but we are dependent on our local neighbours for such things as water. A lot of these people use garages for water. They will use the local showers. During the pandemic, when these were closed, they had nowhere to go.

**Billy Welch:** The large majority of Gypsy and Traveller people, the ones who have settled in their houses, have just found the same difficulties as the settled community has. It has been difficult to get to see a doctor or get an appointment, but that has been the same for even the wider community, because of the pandemic; it has overloaded healthcare and what have you.

I have a caravan site in Darlington. We got as many people as possible, the ones who did not have a permanent address or were stuck on the

sides of the road, on to the sites to get them off the road so they could go with the lockdown and use our addresses—quite a few are using my office address at the moment—so that they can access doctors and everything in general really.

Those who do not have a permanent address and are stuck on the sides of the road are the ones who have been really struggling. With regard to the large majority of them, we have managed, in the same way as the settled community.

**Mihai Călin Bica:** I would first like to bring to the awareness of everyone that, as of 2013, the UK has a population of at least 200,000 Roma living in the UK, who have settled in the UK from all over the world but mostly from eastern European countries, as we all know, such as the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria, but not only those. We also know historically that we face barriers to accessing public services. For example, up to 60% of us are functionally illiterate and 20% of European Roma self-declare as illiterate. We also face huge difficulties using the online environment. Although there is pretty much no information about this, we have seen ourselves that just about 20% of us have access to equipment, such as smartphones, tablets or laptops. All these things have made it historically very difficult for us to access public services.

Since the pandemic, as you mentioned, all those challenges have increased considerably. With regard to Roma, we have looked at the situation particular to us. We have looked at the people we work with directly and seen that about 24% of the people we worked with during the pandemic relied on charity foodbanks. We have also seen 40% of them experiencing a financial emergency during the pandemic and having to borrow money. Connected with that, as Roma, we were not aware of things such as charity foodbanks at the start of the pandemic, and that the financial support available was mostly available through online means—I am talking here about universal credit and the Self-employment Income Support Scheme—which has made it almost impossible for people from our communities to access the services and support they needed during those times.

Furthermore, we already experienced a lot of health issues pre-pandemic. Since the pandemic started and during it, it has been even more difficult for us to access health support, especially as this is moving more and more towards the online environment. Unfortunately, nothing has improved, to be honest. We have seen some public health officials and NHS officials making efforts to hear from us, to speak with us, but we have not seen actual changes happening in practice yet.

**The Chair:** We are meeting virtually today. All this has gone on at a real pace during the pandemic, with much more access of digital all the way, in health, education and other things. Presumably, that has been a problem in your communities.

**Josie O'Driscoll:** It has not just been about being digitally excluded. It is about the literacy issues. Take the welfare system, where you have a journal and you have to upload documents. If you are illiterate, you cannot do that. It is pushing people into the system. It is making them more stressed and anxious. I had a case recently where a person got themselves into thousands of pounds worth of debt because they could not upload the documents during the pandemic. We have had to deal with those kinds of situations, where people are getting into more debt because of these systems and the way they work.

**Mihai Călin Bica:** On top of the fact that only 20% of the Roma people we work with have access to IT equipment, only 3% of them know how to fill in an online form or make an online application. Because of that, we have seen people facing huge difficulties accessing the online environment. We have seen huge problems being created because of that.

I would like to refer here to the case of a lady, a single mother, who I am supporting. She does not have a social network, friends, around to help with communicating, translating or interpreting for her. She is using Google Translate to communicate with her local authority, as she has been provided with temporary accommodation because she was a victim of domestic abuse.

She almost lost her flat, because she was trying to explain to the local authority that she moved her daughter from one nursery to another, and there are other costs involved and so on. The local authority understood from that message that she moved out from the property and sent her a message saying that her contract would stop and so on, just because she used Google Translate. She did not have other means to communicate with the local authorities.

There is a huge risk of very dangerous situations being created because of that. People do not have access to the support they need. What is available for most people, especially the Roma, is third parties, who allegedly want to help but then charge a lot or put people at risk of an exploitative situation.

**Bill Lloyd:** There are obviously some very specific problems associated with the Covid pandemic that affect the different communities in different ways. In a way, they are part of the two big problems. Access to public services and digital exclusion depend on solving two very big problems, for which all the information is in, but somehow they do not seem to be able to solve them and make any progress. Those big problems are more about permanent sites for the nomadic people and the reasons for exclusion from education, which are very many.

They are huge topics and we may be coming to them. I wanted to put down a marker that, in a way, those outweigh the individual problems of individual communities with Covid, because they are right across the board. I hope we can get to speak about them later.

**Q2 Lord Bichard:** Thank you for coming in and helping us today. I wanted to ask two questions. First, to what extent do your different communities face different challenges when trying to access public services? To what extent do authorities understand those differences? Are there particular differences between communities?

Secondly, I cannot help but ask this. I have read all the briefing. We have had a national strategy, which Lord Bourne was responsible for producing. We have had a strategy from Lord Greenhalgh, which was mostly about education. We have had the women's equality group. We have had the disparity unit. We have data all over the place, but it does not seem to me that very much is happening. The question may seem a strange one. What do you think we can do to help you get some change, rather than yet more strategies?

The first question, which I was supposed to ask, is whether there are differences in the needs of the communities and the barriers they experience.

**Billy Welch:** There are cultural differences between the communities and different needs in different parts of the country. In some parts of the country, County Durham and Darlington for instance, we are very fortunate. We have a council there, Durham council, that understands the situation. They understand and realise that there is a necessity for permanent pitches, which we have plenty of and soon we will have a few more. They seem to have a good handle on it.

We are very fortunate in County Durham that we did not really face any more problems than the wider community in accessing doctors and things, because public services have all been under a strain with Covid. It is not the same all over the country. For the ones who are stuck on the sides of the road in different parts of the country, that is where the problem lies. There is a serious shortage of permanent pitches and campsites for these people. This new law that has just come out, the police Bill, is not going to help things. It will make the situation worse.

**Lord Bichard:** Presumably that applies to all the communities, whether they are Irish Travellers, Roma or Gypsies. Are there particular challenges that one or other of the communities face, or is it roughly the same—you need education and sites?

**Billy Welch:** One problem is what we were talking about before. It is about trying to sort things out digitally, on the internet, on the computer. That becomes basically impossible for some of them. It makes life very difficult and it stresses them. It can be very stressful. The main thing is that, if we could get them in, get them on to permanent sites, get them settled, the education would be better. They would have an address to get in contact with doctors. They would have all the things that the wider community takes for granted—the basic amenities.

This is the problem with some of them, the ones who are stuck and have nowhere to go. The ones like me, the large majority who are settled, are accessing public services. It is starting to work better and better. It is

improving all the time, but it is the ones who are stuck out there with nowhere to go; that is the problem.

**Lord Bichard:** Mihai, what can we do to help?

**Mihai Călin Bica:** I agree. Many of the outcomes are similar, in education, health, employment and so on. There are some differences, as mentioned. I would like to point out here the fact that the European Roma population speak different languages. Our level of knowledge of English is quite limited still. That is a huge barrier for us in accessing public services.

We are migrant communities living in the UK. Therefore, we have to prove our right to live in the UK and access public services, which is problematic. On top of that, we came in waves to the UK. I am talking here about the so-called new arrivals. In the first years after they come to the UK, they do not know how the system worked. They are not familiar with concepts that exist in the UK, such as engagement and parenting. They need to learn.

Unfortunately, the services are still not adapted to meet the needs of these new arrivals, to help them learn, get a grip of what is going on and adapt to their new home country. These are the important differences.

**Josie O'Driscoll:** Can I mention the difference with Irish Travellers? Yes, we speak English, but there is still a language barrier, because people take a lot of the English we speak and the words we use differently, and do not understand what we are saying.

What Billy said about people in houses being okay is not the same for us. We still face the same discrimination, social exclusion and inequalities whether we are in houses or caravans. I can tell you that, on some public local authority sites, we face discrimination. We face discrimination in that we do not have a right to buy on those sites. We have licences. We do not have secure tenancies. We cannot get a warm home discount like everybody else in social housing. A lot of the sites are not allowed to choose their own energy provider. They have to buy from the council, so they have no choice there. There is discrimination, even within social housing or social sites.

**Billy Welch:** What Josie is talking about there is 100% right. On the site that we have now in Darlington and the other sites, in the beginning they did not want to give us the choice of providing our own power suppliers. We had this argument quite a few years ago, we sorted it out and now each individual pitch on the site has a tenancy agreement. We call them pitch agreements. It is a tenancy agreement like you would get in a house. If you want to change your power supplier, you can.

I understand what Josie is saying, because we were in the same position a few years ago. We are up in the north of England here, in County Durham. Gradually, slowly but surely, we are moving forward and chipping away at things. It is improving. The people who are in the

houses and on the campsites now are accessing public services better than they ever were. It was difficult to begin with, but it is improving.

**Lord Bichard:** Our Chair is always telling us that County Durham is paradise on earth and now you are confirming it, are you not? Bill, do you see differences between the communities and their needs?

**Bill Lloyd:** No, not in addition to what has already been said. I was going to make a small point. As far as the Romani are concerned, the group that is different is the group that is still nomadic. There, the problem is finding permanent sites. Your main question was what we can do to change this. People have been calling out for more sites for the last 20 years that I am certain of, and probably for longer, but it is not happening. One of the most important things you could do is to find out why it is not happening.

I am not a planner. I get involved with planning applications from time to time to help Gypsy and Traveller people get their sites. You could do a fairly quick survey of all the local authority planning authorities and find out, say in the last three years, since these reports came out about access to public services, how many planning applications have been made for permanent sites. How many have been accepted? How many have been refused? In particular, why have they been refused?

We suspect that they have been refused because of our democratic process, which means that the councillors who sit on the committees deciding these applications are fearful of their seats if they support it. They are democratically representing people who do not want these sites, so it is a really difficult problem. We need a slight adjustment in policy. Unfortunately, you would have to put up with the democratic issue that some people might not like it, but I do not think you will get more sites while people object to the planning applications. We have been trying for years and it is not happening.

As we might come on to, not having a permanent address is a massive handicap. I accept that your question was about what is different, and this is common to all the communities. I think I have made the point.

**Lord Bichard:** There are only about eight local authorities that have a plan for sites, reaching forward 10 or 15 years. Most others do not have future plans.

**Bill Lloyd:** That is an underlying problem. It is very difficult, but identifying the core of the problem is more important than collecting more information that we already know.

**Josie O'Driscoll:** It is not just about sites. People are nomadic. We have been nomadic for thousands of years. If people want to be nomadic, they should be allowed to. There should be negotiated stopping, which is a concept that has come from Leeds GATE and been tried and tested in Leeds. It has shown that they can save money by doing it. Have these places for people who want to be nomadic.

**Billy Welch:** Also in County Durham, we have a very similar system to what they have in Leeds GATE. I have worked with Durham council to identify temporary stopping places when people are migrating through Durham, whether they are on their way to and back from Appleby fair or just migrating through in general. There are temporary stopping places in and around Durham.

I have worked very closely with Durham council to identify these places, good safe areas, and it works well. It saves the council a fortune. The Gypsies and travelling people are happier. The local residents are happier. The Gypsies are where they want to be and where they should be. They are not in the wrong place. It is not impossible. It can work and it is a model that should be wheeled out for the rest of the country.

Q3 **Lord Willis of Knaresborough:** In 1990, I was leader of Harrogate Borough Council, when we were faced with a very major problem regarding Travellers and Gypsies in particular in the area. We went ahead and built two sites, both of them managed by the national Gypsy Council. Both of them are still there. Both of them are playing a real part within the communities. Quite frankly, we got that through the council—it was hugely opposed—because the money for building those sites was free at the time. It came through the county councils and was a complete 100% grant to build those. That was then going to disappear.

Would you want to sign up to having a mandatory requirement for local authorities to provide sites, within specific timescales, and providing the finance to do so as three things in a proper campaign to achieve what you want, rather than simply saying, "Sometime in the future"? I do not mind who answers, provided you agree.

**Billy Welch:** Yes, I agree. I have had this argument before with MPs and councillors up and down the country at different meetings. I was even down in Westminster one time. It should be made compulsory for local authorities to provide pitches for roughly the amount of Gypsies and Travellers in their area, like it is to build houses. I think there is a plan in this country to build 300,000 houses, but there is no mention of Gypsies and Travellers. They must think they will vanish off the face of the earth, but they are not. They will still be there. Until it is made compulsory for a local authority to provide these pitches, we will keep going round in circles.

**Mihai Călin Bica:** I wanted to respond to the previous question about what can be done. One thing that we think would make a huge difference for us regards that language barrier. None of the public services in the UK provides Romanes language interpreting services, which is the language that we Roma speak. They provide language interpreting in the language of the country of origin, but not in our language. That simply does not exist. There are some exceptions at a very local level with local services, but it is not a general rule.

Also, a lot of the issues are happening because of the negative views that people who work in public services hold about our communities, not just



the Roma but also Gypsy and Traveller communities. This happens in schools and various services. That influences the process a lot when someone from our communities is trying to access public services. We need to challenge those attitudes. We have seen Roma children in schools, for example, saying that most of the problems they have are because of the views that the teachers have about them, not necessarily the views that other pupils have. This has to be addressed and challenged.

**Q4 Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth:** Thanks very much to the panel. It is very good to hear the different views. I am sure that Billy Welch is right about cracking the problem of sites for nomadic communities, the Gypsy and Traveller communities. The Roma are largely settled, but I am sure that is right about having a statutory obligation. I cannot see any other answer than that one.

I will move us on to the other issue that Billy mentioned as being of prime importance, and that is education. That is, in some ways, a more difficult nut to crack, because for communities that are nomadic and not digital, it will be very difficult to provide an effective education. I would appreciate thoughts from the panel if they have any ideas. It is a problem in health too, but you can see a way of cracking it, with doctors going into the communities. You cannot really see that with teachers. How should we, as a community, as a nation, be tackling the education issue?

**Billy Welch:** You have been to my site before, Lord Bourne. It is nice to talk to you again anyway. I have a very close relationship with the education authorities, and somewhere on my site for them to come and meet, and we talk about things, with the different cultures and beliefs that we have. We may get into education later.

One of the advantages is that, because they are there and talking to us, we have all the children in school. Most of them go to school until they are about 11 years old. When they are nomadic, they still have to be settled for the winter. They like to be in somewhere for the winter. That is the main time for the children to get education. If we have proper sites, like my site, and we have the authorities working with whoever is in charge of the site and the people on the site, it works.

We are getting our children educated, mostly in the winter. They go away in the spring. They travel all summer and most of the autumn. They are getting another type of education, but it is starting to work and they are getting more and more educated. It gets back down to the same thing: the sites and the permanent pitches, where they can register in the schools.

**Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth:** I agree. I do not think it is ideal if they are having education only for the winter. It is obviously better, but it is still a problem, is it not?

**Billy Welch:** Even when they are travelling about and staying in temporary places, they sometimes get the children into school. When they are stuck on the sides of the road, it is a bit more difficult, because

it is not a proper address. If they go from, say, my site to another permanent site, as soon as they arrive on that site they can register their children at the local school and the schools can take them in. The problem is the ones who are stuck on the side of the road and cannot get on the sites because there are not enough pitches. That is where the problem lies, with the education for those children.

**Josie O'Driscoll:** To be honest with you, the discrimination and bullying in schools will prevent children learning and being sent to school. This is going on. We know that we were supposed to get a strategy two and half years ago, which you announced, Lord Bourne. We still have not seen that strategy. It is nowhere to be seen. We need a strategy to look at the attainment of Gypsy and Traveller children and what is going on in the schools. Until we get that, we are never going to get any further on.

You can have children who will school all their life. If they are not in the right environment, they are not going to learn. They have to be in the environment where they will learn, not one where they spend more time in school thinking about where the next bully is going to come from. They cannot learn in that environment anyway, so that needs to be addressed before anything else.

**Mihai Călin Bica:** I would echo very much what Josie has mentioned. It would be very useful to look at the report that the Anti-Bullying Alliance has developed on the experience of bullying that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children have in schools. You will see that our children confirm that, unfortunately, most of it actually comes from educational staff, from teachers themselves, who are saying things. This makes children uncomfortable. They then do not want to go to school.

Just a few days ago, I spoke with a 12-year-old girl who said that she does not want to go to school any more because other kids are picking on her and her teachers do not want to listen to her. She said, "I just don't want to go back there any more". This somehow needs to be addressed, through Ofsted or other means. Teachers need to change their attitudes about children.

I would also like to add that we need the education system to work more with our parents, because our parents, unfortunately, are the ones who have a more negative experience in relation to school than our children. Unfortunately, they will then pass their own negative experiences on to their children. That means low aspirations, repeating to their children that they will have little chance of having good careers, jobs and so on.

That means that the system needs to work a lot with the parents and adapt its service to work. In the examples in the UK where this is happening, we are seeing huge differences in the outcomes of those children and the results they have in education. They wish to continue that and have aspirations.

**Billy Welch:** I agree with Josie and Mihai. There is serious bullying in the schools, but it is mostly in the secondary schools. That is why they

usually take their children out when they get to about 11 years old. Before they go to secondary school, they are taken out because of the bullying. In the primary schools, it is generally not too bad, but it is when they get to that secondary school that the problems really start.

Another reason why we take the children out of schools, other than the bullying, is that we have realised over the centuries that you can have as good an education as you want, but we are not going to get a job with the settled community, not one that is worth doing anyway. They just point blank refuse to employ us, whether we are Roma, Gypsy or Irish Traveller. They will not give us a job.

This is one of the reasons why, as people, especially the Gypsies and the Irish Travellers, we have become self-sufficient and self-contained. We have to be because, no matter what education you get, if you are a Gypsy, and especially if you live on a caravan site, you are not going to get a job. If you do, it is not going to be a very well-paid job, so we tend to set ourselves up in business.

To give an example, I left school when I was 10 or 11 years old. I went to work with my father for a couple of years. Then I went to work with an uncle and learned a different trade. Then I went to work with another uncle and learned a different trade. When I was 17, I was sent to Canada with another uncle again to learn a different trade. By the time I was 19 or 20 years old, on my own and setting up my own business, I understood six different trades. I had learned them from my uncles. Then I picked one and, if I was not doing any good at it, I could fall back on the other trades.

This is an education that our children desperately need if they want to be able to support themselves in life. Do not depend on the wider community, because we have been let down so many times. To not take a child out of school and give them that education is a big chance for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma to take. We have to make sure that they can stand on their own two feet. Sometimes, it is not possible in the wider community.

**Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth:** There are exceptions to this, Billy, where people get jobs. One of the problems is that, when they do, for understandable reasons they do not shout about their Gypsy heritage. We need to look at that as well.

**Billy Welch:** It is. There are exceptions where people get jobs, but it is very rare. In general, the large majority look at it and think, "If we leave these children in the secondary school now, they're getting bullied anyway and it's not a place they want to be". Primary school is all right when they are young, but when they get to the secondary school they are not comfortable. They are in an alien environment.

To make sure that they have a future, we have to educate them ourselves. This is why we are the most self-contained people in the world. We can go to any country, and adapt and survive. We have to be

able to do this. It is something we have learned over thousands of years. It is difficult to explain it to the education authorities. I did not travel just the British Isles; I travelled the world. I have been round the world three times. When our children are travelling in these different countries, they are learning about different trades, cultures and ways of life. It is an education you cannot get in school.

**Bill Lloyd:** Not to undermine the bullying aspect, which is very serious, Billy was talking about being self-contained. A 19-year-old Gypsy boy, just talking about the boys for the minute, will have learned these trades. He will be able to make a living. He will be able to buy vehicles and trailers, get married, support a family and become a man, become an adult, at the age of 19, with no debt and a good earning potential. If he stays at school, he will have none of that. If he goes to university, he will have a debt of £45,000. Overcoming that is very difficult.

There is another aspect, which is worth mentioning, although it is difficult. There are cultural reasons why many Gypsy children are excluded from school or not sent to school. It is a big topic, including that we know that they are not keen on conventional sex education and the whole gender identity agenda, which has moved into official educational policy. Educational policy would have to be changed to correct that.

This is not to do with the position of LGBT in their own community, which generally they feel is acceptable. This is among the Romani people. They do not want their children to leave school with a different set of moral values from the ones of their immediate family, their surroundings and their history. They have preserved their identity for hundreds of years, in spite of all sorts of victimisation, and they are very keen on keeping hold of that identity. They are basically quite a conservative group with a small C. They do not want to give up that cultural identity.

That has not been recognised, because there is a liberal agenda, which has moved into the mainstream for the national curriculum and everything else. There are some real cultural obstacles. I do not know what the solution is, but I am saying that you cannot ignore that. If you ignore it, you will never solve the problem of getting Romani children, in particular, into schools.

**The Chair:** I heard about this yesterday. I am not sure that I want to go into it yet. The question I was dying to ask, but I do not think is appropriate because we do not have time, apart from anything else, is what happens to the girls, but never mind.

Q5 **Lord Davies of Gower:** Good afternoon to the panel. I would like to pick up on access to public services and how well the public service providers combine with you when designing and delivering public services to the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community.

**Josie O'Driscoll:** It is non-existent in places where there are no Gypsy, Roma or Traveller organisations. Where it will be pushed and where we can engage is within the organisations. There are lots of places in the UK

that do not have Gypsy and Traveller organisations, so they have been left behind. They have no engagement whatever with local authorities.

**Lord Davies of Gower:** Billy, you were nodding there. Do you want to come in on that?

**Billy Welch:** Like Josie said, there are not enough of them up and down the country, and quite a few have been left behind.

**Mihai Călin Bica:** I would echo very much what Josie has mentioned. On top of that, the means that exist today to engage with communities such as ours are simply not adapted for the way we work and engage with people. If a local authority wants to seek the views of the GRT communities on developing a new street or something, it will do that through an online survey mostly, or through announcing a meeting at the local council. That announcement will, again, be made online over a sort of meeting platform.

These things are simply not accessible to us. We are not seeing any extra efforts being made to ensure that we can actually participate in that discussion. Some local authorities are making efforts, but that is mostly connected to where we have a presence of Roma organisations, as Josie has mentioned. In other cases, they have people who make that extra effort. That means that they seek out where the community is, go there and try to meet people, speak with them about their problems and then introduce whatever topic it is. This happens extremely rarely.

The classic way is just engaging with people via the online platforms and so on, which simply is not accessible for us. We work long hours. We look after our children. We have big families. We simply do not know, understand or see the value of filling in an online survey or writing a letter to the local council, especially as many of us do not even know how to do that.

**Billy Welch:** Not meaning to go back over old ground about the schools, but in the schools you have the Sikh community, the Muslim community, the Jewish community, the Hindu community—whichever communities they are. They seem to make space for those communities, for the faith, the beliefs and the culture. They do not seem to do that with Gypsy, Traveller and Roma. A space is not made in the schools for them to understand.

We are fortunate in that they are doing that in Darlington and County Durham now. We have a Gypsy, Traveller and Roma month and things are improving. Like I say, it is another model that should be wheeled out around the country to make space for the Gypsies and Travellers, so that the teachers and pupils understand the culture, beliefs and traditions more.

**Lord Davies of Gower:** Perhaps I can turn it around slightly. What contribution can you make, Billy and Josie, to make designing and delivering public services easier, given your nomadic lifestyle?

**Josie O'Driscoll:** Where there are Gypsy and Traveller organisations like ours, we can sit down and get the word out to our communities. We can bring them into this space. We can bring the council up here. If they want to ask questions, they can do that within our offices, but we have to push. We always have to push to have Gypsies and Travellers represented.

I will give you an example. There is an equality and inclusion strategy. This is the first time we have ever been mentioned in an equality and inclusion strategy in our area. With the push from Traveller organisations, this can happen. We can sit down and talk to the local councillors and planners. We can get things moving.

**Billy Welch:** Another good thing that is working really well, which we have been doing up in the north for quite a while, is going into the schools. I do talks for the children about our culture, our traditions, where we came from, how we come to be here, the language and the way of life. Then, when I have done that, I invite the schools back to my caravan site. I set up the old Gypsy horse-drawn wagon and an old-fashioned encampment; Lord Bourne has seen that set-up. I show the schools how we used to live. Then I take them into a modern caravan and a modern outside kitchen, and show them how we live today, which basically the same but in a more modern, 21st-century way.

That is also very educational for the teachers and the councils. The councils and teachers come along with them and it opens their eyes. When people understand something more, they do not fear it. I genuinely believe that the large majority of people in this country are not racist and prejudiced, but they are frightened of what they do not understand, and the media have not helped us. They can get a better understanding of who we are, where we came from and how we came to be here, our culture, language and traditions, and the fact that we go back thousands of years.

I like to explain to them that we are not society's rejects. We have not been kicked off some housing estate somewhere for being antisocial or not paying our rent. We are an ancient people with an ancient culture and language that goes back thousands of years. When they have a better understanding of that, the councils, the teachers and especially the schoolchildren go away with a completely different view on it all. We have been doing that in the north-east, and it has worked really well.

I do not mean to keep repeating myself, but it is another model that could be wheeled out round the country. You need to have genuine travelling people, genuine Gypsies and genuine Roma, going into the schools and doing this, not someone who has a college education and has met some Gypsies, met some Travellers, spent a bit of time with them and thinks they can go in and do it. It does not work like that. It has to come from the horse's mouth, if you like.

It works well and we need more of it in the country. Like I say, the majority of the people in this country are not racist or bigoted, but people

by nature are frightened of what they do not understand, including us. The more they understand about us, especially the councils, the better the situation gets.

**Lord Davies of Gower:** That is very helpful. Thank you.

**Mihai Călin Bica:** I would like to refer to something that we came across from a public service and the way they see working with a community such as ours. I do not want to name it, but they say that they are using a community development approach when engaging with our communities. That is at least something that we feel very strongly about. It is something that we use in our own practice and that brings really good results. As per that example, that has brought very good results there too.

I will say a few things which that service shared with us. These are concepts that they use when engaging, for example, with Roma. They try as much as possible to avoid any assumptions when they work and engage with us. They also try to treat everyone as individuals. They like to listen and honour the people who speak and share their experience with them. They give people a lot of time and try to simplify the process of that engagement as much as possible. Simply, these sorts of values and concepts made a huge difference in their case and in our own case. This community development approach could have a significant impact.

**Q6 Lord Filkin:** Thank you very much indeed for the quite fascinating, if at times depressing, evidence. I remember some of it from when I used to be responsible for the Thistlebrook site in Abbey Wood in the London Borough of Greenwich, as director of housing there. It was not perfect, but at least it was a site.

In a sense, the comments we have heard already have answered quite a bit of the question I was down to ask, which was about where the good practice is and what good practice matters. It would be very useful if the witnesses could spend a few minutes after this session with Tristan on the phone to see whether there are any other points of best practice that we should be aware of: what specifically, where and why?

I would like to use the short period of five minutes that we have to go back to William Lloyd's question. Earlier in the session it was said, probably by Mike Bichard, that we have to focus if we are to have any impact at all. If we produce 15 recommendations, I can guarantee that nothing much will happen, because they just go into the system.

William Lloyd made the very powerful argument that although not everybody wants to live in a permanent site, a permanent site opportunity is extremely important as a foundation point for many public services. It is pretty obviously important for education, health, dialogue and understanding. He made that point very clearly.

Do people agree that the opportunity to live on a permanent site is a pretty fundamental and basic need for any of the other services to start getting better? That is a simplification, but you have my general thrust. If there is time, we might turn to how on earth we make that happen.

**Billy Welch:** Yes, definitely, 100%. This is what we have been saying all along. Whatever you do in this world, nothing can be perfect, but you can improve it beyond recognition. The way to do this is to provide permanent sites. When I say "permanent sites", they are places where Gypsies, Travellers and Roma can travel from site to site. Sometimes they stay there permanently. Sometimes they stay a while, go to another one, then go to another one. They can continue to be nomadic, but they have somewhere to travel to and travel around. It is a place where we can access public amenities. It is a place where it all begins, with education and the NHS.

**Lord Filkin:** That is very clear. Thank you.

**Josie O'Driscoll:** Can I give you an example of how the processes and procedures can stop Gypsies and Travellers? I will use myself as an example. My father has a bit of land. He is allowed two pitches on that land. I have grown up now and I need my own caravan. The council says that I cannot have that caravan because only two mobiles and two caravans are allowed. I cannot have that caravan and they are breaching their licence. That means that I have to leave that site.

I might have to go to the local council and ask for temporary accommodation. I will get into this temporary accommodation. I am stuck in it for 15 or 20 years, probably claiming housing benefit. I have to wait 15 or 20 years for a house that I did not want in the first place. There is a solution. They could have given my family another pitch on that site. I am on housing benefit for 15 or 20 years, a burden on the state, when there was a solution to it all along that they could have used.

**Lord Filkin:** Thank you. That is very helpful.

**Mihai Călin Bica:** The vast majority of Roma in the UK are settled, so the majority of us do not live on caravan sites, but we have huge problems with accommodation. That could be overcome by a mediation process between the local authorities and the private rental market to support the Roma in accessing that. We are trying to rent properties and landlords are refusing us because of prejudice and stereotyping or overcharging us for a room in short-term accommodation that is very overcrowded.

On top of that, the process of getting temporary accommodation or social housing is, again, online. There is very little information accessible for us to go through that process and extremely little support for us. For example, we have lots of cases of people who get evicted, get into temporary accommodation and stay there for 10, 12 or 15 years, because they do not know how they can get on the housing register. They do not know how to bid for properties.

We know that there are limited numbers of properties. It would help a lot if that process could somehow be mediated by the local authorities and people could be supported in making those applications, maybe getting appropriate private rentals, for example, through secure contracts and so



on. That process is not mediated at all and it puts us at a lot of risk of being exploited by rogue landlords and being asked to pay a lot of money.

**Lord Filkin:** Again, that is very helpful. Bill, would you like the last word on whether this should be a particular focus or a challenge taken by us?

**Bill Lloyd:** Yes, it certainly should, but I wanted to make a couple of points that complicate the issue very slightly. The official definitions of Gypsy, Roma, Traveller are very specific and clear to avoid questions of ethnicity. The three cultural groups that we have talked about here—Irish Traveller, English Romanichal and Roma groups—have quite different cultures and tend not to share sites. That needs to be borne in mind; it is very important that provided sites have slightly different requirements.

I would like to mention another group that may not be within the brief of this committee but needs some of these questions to be addressed. There are very many people who are not ethnic Gypsies but who meet the definition of Gypsy, Roma, Traveller—they meet the Traveller part—because they are on the road for other reasons. They may be homeless, they may be living an alternative lifestyle or they may be travelling for work, but they do not have a permanent home.

As we have housing crises and all sorts of other problems that make it more and more difficult for people, there are more and more people living on the side of the road. Once upon a time, they were called New Age Travellers. They are just people who have adopted a nomadic lifestyle for cultural or economic reasons, and they fall under this umbrella. They need to be looked after in some way. Most of the sites that we are talking about are for these cultural groups, but the new police, courts and sentencing Act that is coming in will make it extremely difficult for this group to continue even to exist.

That is enough. I know we are running short of time, but you get the point. I would be happy to talk about this afterwards, if you wish.

**Lord Filkin:** That is very helpful indeed. From what we have heard, there are many other issues that will not be solved just by having access to permanent sites or better access to accommodation, as Mihai pointed out, but it is pretty basic, from what you said. This is self-evidently an enormous policy failure by both central and local government, and I think we know why—for the reasons that have been talked about.

We have had two suggestions about what would shift it. One is making it compulsory for every local authority to provide a site. To be blunt with you, getting that through government and through Parliament would be pretty hard work. We have had another one, which reminded us that money sometimes talks. Phil Willis said that, when it was free and time-limited, it stimulated some supply. Would something like that be desirable, or are there any other ways in which we could try to break this enormous policy failure?

**Billy Welch:** That is where we start—making it compulsory to provide pitches in every authority. That is the beginning of it, and then the authorities working closely with the Gypsies, Roma and Travellers to understand the culture, the traditions and the beliefs. Make a space for us, like you have with every other ethnic minority and religion in this country. Do the same thing for us, but we have to begin with pitches for the nomadic ones anyway, and housing in the case of the Roma.

**Mihai Călin Bica:** On the point about homelessness and rough sleeping, which is the case for many from Roma communities, rough sleeping services are simply not adapted to the situation of Roma. Accommodation available to rough sleepers is for individuals only, while Roma sleep rough in larger numbers and in family units, for various reasons. In many cases, they are being offered accommodation for one individual in that particular family, and then the process simply fails because that family does not want to be split. The offer is simply not there, although there are some attempts starting at the moment.

**Bill Lloyd:** Josie pointed out negotiated stopping, which is a really important point. Negotiated stopping solves some of these problems—not everywhere, but it really has a track record of solving problems. As far as I am aware, it is not part of official policy yet, but it could be adopted as something intermediate.

**Lord Filkin:** That is very helpful. There could be a very interesting and short, focused inquiry by us just on these issues of access to appropriate stopping places, permanent accommodation and mainstream housing, but that is for another day. Thank you all very much indeed.

**The Chair:** I am really sorry, everyone, but we have run out of time. It is inevitable, but thank you very much for coming and spending time with us. We will be in touch with you. If there is anything that you think of that you wish you had said, just let us know and one of the staff will come back to you. Thank you very much indeed.