

MEN ALOUD:

ENGAGING WITH GYPSY/TRAVELLER
MEN IN SCOTLAND REPORT

March 2022

ABOUT MECOPP

Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project (MECOPP) is an established, Edinburgh based, carers organisation specialising in supporting Black and Minority Ethnic carers, cared for people and those in the family and community affected by caring situations, disabilities and longterm conditions.

“By working in partnership with carers, the voluntary and statutory sectors, MECOPP actively seeks to challenge and dismantle barriers that deny Black and Minority Ethnic carers access to health, social work and other social care services in Edinburgh, the Lothians and further afield.”

MECOPP works specifically to:

Support Black and Minority Ethnic carers to access supports and services appropriate to their caring situation.

Support Gypsy/Traveller (GT) communities in rural and urban areas of Scotland.

Develop a strategic response to identified gaps in service provision.

Assist service providers, both statutory and voluntary, in the development of culturally competent services.

Develop opportunities for the active involvement of Black and Minority Ethnic carers in consultation planning.

Raise the profile of Black and Minority Ethnic carers and their needs at a national level.

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MEN ALOUD – ENGAGING WITH GYPSY/TRAVELLER MEN IN SCOTLAND

CONTEXT

The Scottish Government and COSLA's joint policy document 'Improving the Lives of Scotland's Gypsy/Travellers', 2019-2021, in conjunction with the Community Empowerment Act (Scotland) 2015 brings to light the need to engage with Gypsy/Traveller communities in Scotland in order to deliver culturally appropriate and good quality accommodation, health services, education, social services and equality.



In the development of the 2019 policy document communities were consulted, of whom the majority of participants were women. Women often represent the public facing contingent of the community as family, home, health and schooling are traditionally their domain and are the subject of most consultations. Gypsy/Traveller men often go unheard because they rarely participate in consultations. This document explores what some of the main issues facing men from the communities are and what barriers exist that curtail their engagement with authorities and service providers. It concludes with case studies and some suggestions for better engagement with Gypsy/Traveller men.

INTRO

Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project (MECOPP) has been supporting Gypsy/Traveller carers and those they care for for over ten years. From as early as 2012 they have facilitated community members to attend committee meetings at the Scottish Parliament, participate in consultations and research, and to deliver awareness raising training to professionals in both the statutory and voluntary sectors.



Members of Scotland's Gypsy/Traveller community at a Scottish Parliament committee room in 2012.

In that time the overwhelming majority of participants have been women with few men accepting any of the invitations to events.

Through its trusted relationships, mostly with women who are often the primary carers, MECOPP has been successful in belying the 'hard to reach' categorisation of Gypsy/Traveller communities in Scotland.



One of the most important issues around research with Gypsy-Traveller populations relates to finding and making contact with people. For a number of years Gypsy-Travellers have been considered as one of the communities described as ‘hard-to-reach’ (MORI, undated; Van Cleemput and Parry, 2001). The term ‘hard-to-reach’, however, sometimes reflects a lack of knowledge on behalf of the researcher about how, who and where to contact certain groups or individuals, rather than an innate inclination for separateness of the group or individuals concerned.

(Brown, 2010)

However, MECOPP has been less successful in engaging men in participating in any of the opportunities mentioned above.

At an online consultation meeting, in the spring of 2021, between the Scottish Government and Gypsy/Traveller communities, one of the participants asked why men were not being consulted. In response to this question, the Scottish Government commissioned MECOPP to explore the issues facing men from the Gypsy/Traveller communities in Scotland and what barriers might be preventing their engagement.

This document offers some insights from the conversations between MECOPP’s Men’s Engagement and Participation Worker and men from the Gypsy/Traveller community.

Thanks to Tommy Bennett and the many men in the Gypsy/Traveller communities who were so generous with their time in sharing their experiences, issues and concerns and without whom this report would not have been possible.

METHOD

The Men's Engagement Worker has worked with Gypsy Traveller communities since the early 1990s in a variety of capacities and consequently has some long-standing trusted relationships to draw on. In addition, he visited some Gypsy/Traveller sites new to him. Most of the men interviewed live on official Gypsy/Traveller sites.



The interviews were undertaken in an informal conversational style in order to facilitate engagement. Notes were not taken during the meetings, nor were there audio recordings made, as these were thought to formalise the interviews and so risk limiting engagement. Brief notes were made later.

It was made clear to the participants that the worker was “trying to find out” the issues affecting men in particular and how authorities and services could better engage with them. The worker approached the interviews from the standpoint that it is the authorities and services that should explore effective ways to engage with the community, not the men themselves.





MAIN ISSUES AFFECTING GYPSY/TRAVELLER MEN

Accommodation: When invited to describe the issues that affect them most, the overwhelming majority of men cited accommodation as their most pressing concern. This fell largely into two categories: quality of accommodation, and supply of accommodation.

On four of the sites visited the men were concerned with the quality of the accommodation provided, citing the poor-quality build of amenity blocks in particular. The location of the sites was also commented on because sites are often on what they consider to be inappropriate land such as ex-waste dumps or under pylons. Some of the men at one site were concerned for the safety of their children citing damp amenity blocks, leaking sewage and vermin. One man said that: “Living conditions on sites [are] degrading and of poor quality, falling short on standards.” Some were concerned with anti-social behaviour of some residents and how it is dealt with by their landlord or site manager and about decisions on pitch allocation.

One man with disabilities felt he was being forced into housing in order to get the adaptations he needs because the local authority is unwilling to provide them on the site.

Lack of official sites across the country with sufficient pitches was a universal issue and the lack of authorised roadside or transit sites compounded a feeling of insufficient provision. Some men expressed their frustration at having to put up with poor accommodation because there was nowhere else to go, feeling it was too dangerous for them to camp roadside with their children. There was a sense that these issues were forcing them into housing.

Traditions and culture: Some men said they felt unable to maintain their traditional lifeways – travelling for work or to be with family – due to the lack of culturally appropriate authorised accommodation and facilities. This had led to the loss or erosion of their social, economic and cultural life. One man felt that the value of Gypsy/Traveller culture and language should be recognised and that there is a lack of knowledge and respect for their culture.

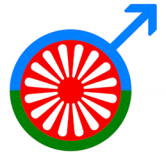
Discrimination: There is a widespread feeling of social exclusion and inequality with the rest of society. Gypsy/Travellers all being “tarred with the same brush”, as one man put it, is a commonly held belief. The men often felt discriminated against by the police, local authorities, government and by the rest of the population when undertaking their work (“not being the right sort”), or going to hospitality venues where there are sometimes signs that say, ‘No Gypsies or Travellers’. Several men said that if they approach the police about such signs the police side with the locals and nothing is done about it. One man felt there exists a negative perception of Gypsy/Traveller men as: “violent, wifebeaters, social security scroungers” and another said that there are not enough positive role models.

Work: One self-employed man on a Gypsy/Traveller site felt he could not use his address on estimates or invoices for fear of losing work. Another man said he thought there was a: “Lack of employability due to negative perceptions.” The high cost of car insurance when the address is a Gypsy/Traveller site is also of concern. Many of the men have limited schooling or skills training but often learn their trade, ‘from father to son’, so have no formal qualifications, affecting their employability. One man said that he could have done with more skills training when younger.

Literacy was an issue for some, leading to what one man described as: “form-filling anxiety’. Lack of knowledge in keeping appropriate records for Tax Assessment, increased regulation leading to a decline in traditional economic opportunities, the unpopularity of cold calling, difficulty in getting a bank account due to lack of ID or utility bills were all cited as challenging issues.

Some also expressed a need for training on how to start a business and the need for support to make businesses legitimate e.g. how to register for tax, doing basic bookkeeping and completing tax returns. Some face challenges in making their living by the changes to, and increase in, legislation/regulation and find it difficult to move on from the grey economy.





Barriers to engagement and participation: There are some long standing trust issues in the Gypsy/Traveller community when engaging with authorities and service providers. Several of the men said that they didn't feel like they were listened to, one expressed it like this: "[You feel] disempowered because you feel nobody listens, so you're not actually legitimised."

When Gypsy-Travellers have been the focus of research, it has sometimes been as 'research subjects' (Greenfields and Home, 2006), rather than having an active role and being fully engaged in the research. As a result, there can be a reluctance to take part in something that is perceived to have very little effect on their lives; a perception based on sensible logic given the decreasing levels of well-being and increasing inequalities faced by Gypsy-Travellers (Cemlyn et al 2009).

(Brown, 2010)

Some men said that their limited knowledge of how "the system" works, of rights in general and tenants' rights in particular, makes engagement challenging. Language can be an issue when talking to officials, particularly when they use unfamiliar technical jargon and policy language. One man who was uncomfortable talking to officials said, "I don't know how to talk to them".

Men from the older generation are less likely to engage because they are suspicious of authority and there is a general suspicion and mistrust of unknown people amongst men more widely. One man said that: "[the] younger generation [are] more likely to talk" and: "now [the] community are more educated and understand that people are trying to help". There could be difficulty engaging with men because they: "come home from work and plonk down in front of the tv".

For some there is a fear of the stigma of being seen to be working with officials and being seen as setting themselves up as 'community leaders.'

Improving engagement and participation: The men were asked about what kinds of things might make engaging easier for them and the key message was that having known, trusted people involved would help. Face-to-face, and initially one-to-one engagement seems to be the preferred option, with group working and online meetings not being popular options. A couple of men mentioned that being seen to be genuine and making an effort is important.

When engaging with women in the community many of the activities take place during ‘office hours’. This is a barrier for men, many of them self-employed, as they are not available during the day and are unlikely to commit to meetings in advance in order to be available for work or business opportunities should they arise. It was suggested that it would be far more likely if meetings were organised for early evening between 6pm and 7pm when men return from their working day and have some time for themselves. It would be more effective to consult and hold meetings on site when working with men living on official sites. Men are more likely to engage if they feel like they are being listened to and their concerns are acted upon.

In some areas of the UK where the authors have worked, the increasing focus on Gypsy-Travellers has led to what Robinson (2002) describes as ‘research fatigue’. Indeed, in one particular study, the attitude of some respondents was very much ‘less talk, more action’ as they had grown increasingly tired of being consulted with, particularly when there was very little action or change in their circumstances.

(Brown, 2010)





Building a traditional tent at the Perth Gathering in 2019.

MECOPP has organised many Family Days and other events and these have been well attended but mostly by women and children. Although the men are very family orientated, they are not attracted to these events. When organising community events such as Family Health Days it is important to provide men with activities specifically of interest to them. Activities likely to be of interest could include craft/skills based, outdoor and cultural activities or practical skills that could help them with their businesses.

CASE STUDIES

Consulting on site improvements: During a discussion exploring participating in a forthcoming consultation there was considerable resistance to the idea of meeting with officials face to face. The men felt uncomfortable talking to officials, they didn't feel listened to or consulted about any changes to their site. This indicated low levels of trust and confidence in their relationship with officials.

The idea was explored further with the men, with more discussion about the benefits of engaging with officials and the possibility that they could influence decisions about their accommodation/homes. Whilst they were willing to acknowledge that it might be beneficial to engage, they were still reluctant to meet with officials. Eventually one man suggested that he would organise some of the men to discuss topics for the consultation and suggested that another, who has good literacy skills, could write down their comments to be presented to officials through an intermediary.

This suggests that by listening to their concerns and discussing what a consultation is about and how their input could be important in shaping the outcome, this would enable them to find their own solution to address their reluctance to engage in person.

Consultation on National Planning Framework 4: MECOPP was approached by a Scottish Government official to explore organising a consultation exercise with a group of Gypsy/Travellers on the new National Planning Framework.

MECOPP had made contact with two residents at a local authority site who had galvanised their community and set up a tenant's organisation. The MECOPP worker knew one of organisers, a male who was now Chair of the Tenant's Group, and so was quickly able to re-establish a trusted relationship.

The Tenant's group had already established good attendance at meetings with the site manager and the community were now experienced in the format of meetings. Working closely with the Chair it was established that, because the men's primary concern



is work, the best chance of getting some attendance was to hold the meeting in the early evening.

The Chair agreed to ask the men if they were interested after the subject and duration of the meeting had been explained. It was made clear that there would be no immediate or direct material change to the community's situation from the meeting.

The Scottish Government official was willing to be flexible and so the meeting took place 'after hours' between 6.30pm and 8pm. Initially six men were expected however on the night 11 attended. More than half of the men contributed significantly to the conversation and the rest contributed at some stage.

The meeting was conducted informally and the men were able to speak as much as they liked about their issues and concerns. The meeting was lively and covered a lot of ground, however it did not limit itself to the remit of the consultation. The Chair explained this as a result of 'new ears' being willing to listen. No recording or notes were taken at the meeting but were written up later.

After the meeting the MECOPP worker and the government official walked round the site with some of the tenants and chatted informally and were shown some of the issues on the site.

Later the Chair reported back that the men were very happy with the meeting and how it was conducted, and would be happy to attend meetings in the future. The men were later offered a funded activity but declined saying they did not need a reward.

The key to the success of this meeting was having a community member consult with the men and explain what the subject and outcomes of the meeting might be. This was reiterated at the meeting to ensure there was no misunderstanding. The willingness of the official and worker to attend 'after hours', when it was more convenient for the men, to keep the meeting informal and the willingness to listen to the men's issues with 'new ears' were all significant factors in its success.

Assessing Funding Applications: As part of the Scottish Government 2040 Housing Strategy, £20 million was made available to assist local authorities to improve and increase site provision for Scotland's Gypsy/Travellers. From the first round of applications six local authorities had progressed to the next stage. MECOPP worked with SG and COSLA to ensure community involvement. To support this, MECOPP recruited community members to look at a summary of the applications focusing on community participation and engagement. They were asked to give their views and to develop questions to be asked of the six local authorities. Their views would be part of the final decision on awarding the funds.

One of the community members was a young man living on a council site who was asked about his experience of the above process, this was his response: "It felt like my voice really did matter, I wasn't just a Gypsy/Traveller sitting there, it wasn't you and us, it was we. It felt like I was valued and could make some difference. I think it was the first time a Gypsy/Traveller was involved at this level.

Communication was a lot of shared info from start to finish, including after the meeting."

Of the meeting itself he said: "[It was] Very formal but we were supported in what to expect and we were made to feel comfortable, we were never just chucked into the deep end. [We were] Always made to feel valued and reassured. You could always ask someone to explain if you didn't understand.

I felt honoured to be part of it."

When asked if there were any improvements that could be made, he said: "How can you improve on going from you and us to we and being sat next to someone as an equal and not just a 'p***y' or scum. Everything I said was just as important as something someone from the Scottish Government said and I can't think that happened in my granny's lifetime."



NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The National Standards for Community Engagement sets out what good practice looks like and gives guidance on how to achieve this.

There are seven standards:

- **Inclusion:** Identify and involve all stakeholders affected by the focus of the engagement.
- **Support:** Identify and overcome barriers to participation.
- **Planning:** Ensure there is a clear purpose to the engagement with shared understanding of community needs and ambitions.
- **Working together:** Effective partnership working.
- **Methods:** Use engagement practices that are fit for purpose.
- **Communication:** Clear and regular communication with all participants.
- **Impact:** Assess the impact of the engagement and learn from it to improve future engagement.



GUIDANCE ON ENGAGING WITH GYPSY/TRAVELLER MEN

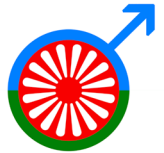
Gypsy/Traveller men have a longstanding mistrust of authority that goes back generations. Engaging with them would be greatly facilitated by finding interlocutors in the community and establishing and developing trusted relationships. Intermediaries such as Site Managers may be able to facilitate this but this is not always the case. Even with trusted relationships some men are unwilling to meet face to face with officials. In these cases, they should be facilitated to find their own preferred ways of participating or engaging.

From this it can be seen that building up trusted interpersonal relationships with men face to face provides the best opportunity to build the relationships that can lead to more engagement and participation.

Based on Men Aloud's conversations the following are the key learning points to better engagement some of which are additional to the National Standards for Community Engagement:

- Visit the site and get to know people. It is important to be able to explain why you are visiting to avoid creating suspicion.
- Build trust. If you are seen to be helping and positive, over time, you can build trust.
- Use plain English in spoken and written communication.
- Listening to people's concerns, ideas, solutions and wherever possible accepting them is more likely to lead to greater trust and better outcomes.
- Act on requests for help or support. If you can't help say so.
- Organise meetings to fit in with their availability.
- Make sure participants are fully aware of the scope and realistic outcomes of the meetings or consultations.





- Encourage alternative approaches to participation if people are reluctant to attend meetings.
- Provide activities of interest/relevant to the men when organising events.
- Deliver material improvements to people's lives.
- Don't promise what you can't deliver.
- Don't impose solutions.
- Don't use jargon, official terminology or acronyms.
- Don't overload with consultations/meetings.

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Improving the lives of Gypsy/Travellers: 2019-2021:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/improving-lives-scotlands-gypsy-travellers-2019-2021/pages/7/>

The National Standards for Community Engagement:

<https://www.voicescotland.org.uk/national-standards>

The Community Empowerment Act (Scotland) 2015:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/community-empowerment-scotland-act-summary/>

Doing research'with Gypsy-Travellers in England: reflections on experience and practice. Phillip Brown, 2010, Community Development Journal:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/46144115_%27Doing_research%27_with_Gypsy-Travellers_in_England_Reflections_on_experience_and_practice

MECOPP Gypsy/Traveller Carers Project:

<https://www.mecopp.org.uk/gypsytraveller-carers-project>

MECOPP: Briefing Sheet 15 (May 2020) - Gypsy/Traveller Carers:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c06d635506f-be62ec834460/t/5eb90b1975c2e1070e2c7e98/1589185308010/MECOPP_Briefing_Sheet_15.pdf

Gypsy/Travellers in Scotland - A Comprehensive Analysis of the 2011 Census:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/gypsy-travellers-scotland-comprehensive-analysis-2011-census/pages/6/>

Where Gypsy/Travellers Live: Equal Opportunities Committee Report (2013):

https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/scot_parl_eoc_where_gypsy_travellers_live_2013.pdf?IA5ryRgy65v_UtQUduUL7x9ckYDyB0W4=

Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month in Scotland:

<https://grthm.scot/>

