

2010-03

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James, Zoe

James, Z. and Simmonds, L. (2010) 'The Advice Needs of Gypsies and Travellers in Plymouth: Final Report', *Crimes and Misdemeanours: Deviance and the Law in Historical Perspective*, 4(1), pp.53-66. Available at: <https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/8852>
<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/8852>

SOLON Crimes and Misdemeanours
University of Plymouth

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THE ADVICE NEEDS OF GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS IN PLYMOUTH: FINAL REPORT

*Zoë James and Lesley Simmonds with the
assistance of Ruth Browning¹*

(University of Plymouth with the Plymouth Citizens' Advice Bureau)

1 Introduction

This is the final report of a collaborative project between the Plymouth Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB), and Dr Zoe James and Dr Lesley Simmonds from the University of Plymouth. This project was funded by the 2008 Vice Chancellor's Community Research Awards, and it investigated the legal advice needs of Gypsies and Travellers, with particular focus upon any assistance which CAB may provide.

The aims of the research were:

- To identify current barriers to effective provision of advice by CAB and partner agencies
- To ascertain the advice needs of Gypsies and Travellers in Plymouth
- To understand better how Gypsies and Travellers could be encouraged to use advice services
- To inform best practice in advice provision to the South West region

2 Research Context

Gypsies and Travellers often live outside of the law, on illegal sites or unauthorised developments, due to a lack of spaces for them to legally occupy (James, 2006). Their lack of accommodation and transient lifestyles has resulted in Gypsies and Travellers having low life expectancy, very poor health and low educational attainment levels nationally (Clarke and Greenfields, 2006). Additionally Gypsies and Travellers experience racial abuse and harassment and discrimination (Commission for Racial Equality, 2006).

¹ Dr Zoe James, Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice Studies, Zoe.James@plymouth.ac.uk; Dr Lesley Simmonds, Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice Studies Lesley.Simmonds@plymouth.ac.uk both University of Plymouth. Ruth Browning MSc was the research officer on the project.

Local research on Gypsy and Traveller needs (Southern and James, 2006) has shown that Gypsies and Travellers in Devon reflect this national picture and recommends that their engagement with advice services would facilitate better accommodation and improved reporting of crimes against Gypsies and Travellers, and thus improve their health, welfare and education outcomes. Research carried out on the legal advice services available to Gypsies and Travellers is therefore invaluable in resolving an unmet need within the local area.

The Research Process

The research was carried out via extensive consultation with Plymouth CAB who defined the parameters of the project. Additionally, the research team worked closely with agencies, particularly the Traveller Education Service, who work with Gypsies and Travellers in Plymouth. The close working relationship between the research team and agencies working with Gypsies and Travellers in Plymouth allowed some access to the research setting. Additionally, the research team exploited existing connections to Gypsy and Traveller communities in Plymouth to gain access for research. The research team with the CAB designed a research strategy that was sensitive to the needs of Gypsies and Travellers in the area.

A number of qualitative interviews were undertaken with Gypsies and Travellers from all groupings² within Plymouth: those living on the local authority (L.A) site, those living on unauthorised encampments, those living in housing and show people living on a private authorised site. In depth interviews of approximately one hour each were conducted with:

- seven Gypsies living on the L.A site
- two Gypsies living in housing
- three groups of Gypsies and Travellers living on unauthorised sites

Four in depth interviews were also conducted with stakeholders. These interviews were held with representatives from:

- Social Inclusion Unit within Plymouth City Council
- Traveller Education Service

² Gypsies and Travellers identities are varied, but most commonly are grouped as English Gypsies, Irish Travellers, New Travellers and Show People. English Gypsies and Irish Travellers are recognised as racial groups under Race Relations legislation.

- Shelter
- Racial Equality Council

The interviews with both stakeholders and Gypsies and Travellers were analysed thematically considering the requirements of the CAB, issues raised by existing literature and allowing new themes to emerge.

3 Research Findings

The research findings show that Gypsies and Travellers experience *barriers* to access to service, they have specific *needs*, and there are certain *encouragements* that may engage them better. All of the Gypsies and Travellers spoken to knew of CAB and what the service offers throughout the country.

Barriers

A number of barriers to accessing advice services were identified by the research. The key barriers to accessing advice agencies for Gypsies and Travellers were:

- Racism
 - Failure of understanding between Gypsies and Travellers and advice agencies
 - Poor literacy
 - Lack of confidence
 - Time constraints
- Some Gypsies and Travellers had previous negative experiences of CAB (waiting too long for an appointment, not feeling CAB were sensitive to their needs) and were reluctant to use the service again. These individuals had found another service that had helped and thus they stated that they would access that service for advice in the future due to their previous positive experience. The services they would use were either The Racial Equality Council (REC) or Gypsy Liaison Officers (GLO) from the local authority.
 - Comments from two unauthorised encampments were of apathy towards accessing any service with the majority of people stating they didn't feel any service would be able to serve their needs. Interviewees from one unauthorised encampment however had positive past experiences with CAB and would use the service again. It is worth noting this encampment was more settled than the others, having been in one area for two months.

- Further interviewees stated they had a positive experience in the past using CAB's service; however they would go to the Racial Equality Council or the Gypsy Liaison Officer first for any advice needs, as these organisations are easily accessible and had been accessed recently. The CAB had slipped their minds as being a potentially helpful service. In one interview the REC was unable to help the individual and subsequently they dealt with the situation on their own. In this case the individual had not thought of contacting the CAB, however upon being interviewed for the research they contacted the CAB for advice.

- Other reasons given for using the REC or the GLO first for advice needs as opposed to CAB or anywhere else were that the former mentioned services are specific services for minority groups or Gypsies and Travellers and thus were culturally sensitive to the service user:

They came on site, they tried to understand. The CAB didn't understand and didn't really seem interested. Them visiting us on site makes a big difference, not because we're lazy and that we wouldn't go into town but it's like the people who come here get an understanding of us but the people in town, they all think gypsies are dirty and there's racism and prejudice. (L.A site)

Probably REC, but if they weren't there I'd go to CAB but it's good that REC are there because they are just for racial groups so CAB's for everyone and can be really busy but REC are specifically for us and so they would be less busy and also they understand us because that's what they do, understand our race and our situations and what happens to us all the time. (L.A site)

- Some Gypsies and Travellers felt self sufficient within their community and therefore did not desire the help of CAB. This feedback ranged from interviewees being against using a service for advice to favouring using family and friends for advice, and only using a service if friends and family were unable to help:

We don't need any help, wouldn't bother going into town for anything and wouldn't want anyone coming on to site either, we look after ourselves, we sort ourselves out. (Unauthorised encampment)

Been to family and friends mostly, I've never been to CAB, they wouldn't be able to help, wouldn't do any good. (L.A site)

I would probably go to my family and other people around here first and then if no-one around here can help, then look to go somewhere else, maybe REC or CAB. (L.A site)

- Previous experiences of racism, prejudice and discrimination from services left Gypsies and Travellers suspicious and apathetic to anyone being able to offer them a service or

help. This acted as a particularly worrying barrier to Gypsies and Travellers seeking advice. These experiences were referred to in interviews during discussion of why Gypsies and Travellers were reluctant to go outside of their communities for help and to services they did not know:

The prejudice they've experienced may make them reluctant to receive any help. I don't advertise the fact at all, because of the way I've been treated before so, that might make Travellers who constantly move around, that might make them feel a bit uncomfortable in trying to get some information and that because of how people have treated them before. (Gypsy in housing)

I think if I knew that there was a place I could go to now that I thought they would be able to help, I would go, I mean there's pubs round here we can't go in, they have signs up on the door, 'no gypsies', that's wrong and we know it but who cares about it enough to change it? REC have shown us that they do care and that they make a difference about things. (L.A site)

Service providers also contributed to this view:

It does depend on what sort of perceptions they have and what history your organisation has with them as well. They might have their own reservations about what you stand for because they are very marginalised for example and they may expect to be discriminated against so it is up to you to change that perception." (Stakeholder service)

These findings echo the feelings of discrimination reported in the Plymouth analysis of the Devon Wide Gypsy and Traveller Needs Assessment (James and Southern, 2007) where four out of ten respondents stated they felt that prejudice against their lifestyle had prevented them gaining employment, four out of ten respondents said they had been discriminated against in the provision of services and six out of ten repeatedly said that they had experienced racism.

- The interviews with Gypsies and Travellers highlighted the need for advice and support to be provided speedily. This was either due to the nature of the problem (benefits required, urgent housing need) or the need to move on as part of the travelling lifestyle or a lack of accommodation options and therefore a need for an urgent response. Reference was made by Gypsies and Travellers to past experiences of CAB when immediate appointments were available which would be more favourable than having to telephone for an appointment:

If their issues is one area and they find out information and then begin processing a claim or something, they would more or less have to stay in that area until the problem is sorted, until they can move on, a lot of gypsies don't like being restricted, they like to

move on when they want to and stay where they want to.” (Gypsy in housing)

We called them up and to be honest, that is one thing to be said about them is that we had to keep trying and trying, like all day sometimes to get through, it can take a long time. (L.A site)

...because particularly the travelling group, they will be here for a very short time, 3-4 weeks max and sometimes it's only 2 weeks and when they come down they have specific things they want to do whilst they are here. (Stakeholder service)

Was much easier then, you get to a city and can walk in somewhere for help, you knew there was a CAB in each town and you could just walk in and get help right there and then. Now you have to wait for an appointment and that takes time and you might have already moved on by then. (Unauthorised encampment)

- Gypsies and Travellers struggled to engage with services due to literacy difficulties and a lack of confidence in accessing services. In interviews with Gypsies and Travellers from all groupings, those living on the L.A site, in housing and on unauthorised encampments there were many interviewees with literacy difficulties. Some had improved their reading but still could not write but many were not confident with filling in forms and writing letters:

Also because I can read but I don't write, I can't write really, my spellings bad so I found that difficult in the past trying to get information and help, filling in the forms and writing letters. (L.A site)

I get panic attacks, especially in town offices and I can't read or write very well, so I do need a bit of hand with that, to make sure I've understood everything and filled out forms and things. (Gypsy in housing)

- Gypsies and Travellers lacked knowledge and understanding of the processes used by services and of the services themselves. This was referred to in interviews in two main ways. Firstly Gypsies and Travellers did not know of the range of services open to them and secondly their understanding of how services could help was limited.

I couldn't understand what was happening most of the time. I didn't get all the information I needed to know about what happens in those situations, what's the process, how long these things take. (L.A site)

They're not given yellow pages, like we are in a house. Phone numbers that kind of thing. It's the knowledge really, it's the information is not always around, they need more information about what is available.” (Gypsy in housing)

A lack of understanding on their part means they do not really understand what a service may be able to offer. (Stakeholder Service)

- Services themselves lacked an understanding of Gypsies and Travellers. This was an issue highlighted again both by Gypsies and Travellers and those services working closely with them. For the Gypsies and Travellers this was one of the key reasons they identified for not accessing a service. They defined a lack of understanding of them on the part of services to be a lack of interest and understanding of their culture and way of life, a difficulty in understanding their language and a lack of concern for their situation. Stakeholders identified that they felt many other services were not sensitive to the Gypsies and Travellers needs and thus this caused problems with access.

They do need someone who is used to the way they speak, what they mean, who has worked with them a lot. (Gypsy in housing)

They didn't seem to care about what was happening to us and they just sent us to the council to apply for housing, well that wasn't appropriate as we are gypsies, I grew up in a caravan, I'm 28 years old and I've never lived in a house, that's like saying to someone who is homeless and lives in houses to offer them a caravan. (L.A site)

It's difficult because where do you recommend them to go because you don't want to send them somewhere that isn't sensitive to their needs or aware of Gypsy/ Traveller culture. (Stakeholder service)

Needs

Gypsies and Travellers advice needs fell into the following groups:

- Information on legal rights
 - Accommodation advice
 - Information on benefit entitlements
 - Contact details for appropriate advice agencies
- Requirement for knowledge of legal rights on access to services, racism and discrimination was identified by five of the eleven Gypsy and Traveller interviewees. Gypsies and Travellers highlighted instances of being refused services, suffering racism and harassment and times when they wanted to know their rights specifically regarding accommodation issues. Being able to gain advice on their legal rights in these areas was identified as a key advice need:

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Not being able to get seen at a doctor's surgery, they just refused to see me. In fact when I went to try and register here as temporary patient the receptionist asked me, how many more of you will be turning up then? If I was black, she couldn't of said that to me could she? I would have liked to have got information about my rights then."(L.A site)

There have been times when you need to know stuff and you're not sure about stuff, what your rights are or what the best thing to do is. (L.A site)

Recently I've had some trouble around this area, with racism and harassment and it's still going on now. (Gypsy in housing)

- Having access to suitable contact details for services, particularly telephone numbers, relates to the barrier identified whereby Gypsies and Travellers do not have good knowledge of the services available to them. Many interviewees stated that they needed contact details for services:

A telephone number to call would be helpful. There have many times actually when we have needed information and help and didn't get it because we didn't think there was anyone but actually I suppose there are places, it's just knowing about them. (L.A site)

A list of contact related to the issue you were dealing with, so a list of the places to do with housing would have been really helpful. (L.A site)

- In five out of the eleven interviews with Gypsies and Travellers, accommodation issues and the need for more advice and information on this area was raised. Accommodation issues covered a range of matters, including: site issues, licences and rights, accessing housing, rights as a tenant.

Firstly, Gypsies and Travellers in housing or attempting to move into housing needed advice on this process and their rights as a tenant. Secondly, those living on site wanted to know more information about their site and what their rights were when living in that situation:

About the management of this place, about the management of our licences, things about our site and our rights, housing and prejudices from services. (L.A site)

Most likely on accommodation problems, issues and rent and my rights as a tenant. (L.A site)

For policing and stuff, like if the kids got into trouble or if we are getting hassle from the council about the site and the rules. (L.A site)

These findings concur with the Plymouth analysis of the Devon-Wide Gypsy and Traveller Housing Needs Assessment in that half of the respondents interviewed

had lived in a house at some time and two respondents were looking for alternative accommodation in the Plymouth area, thus information regarding housing has been relevant to this community. Also issues regarding the management of the Plymouth site were prominent in the Housing Needs Assessment thus advice needs on this issue is unsurprising.

- Advice on what benefits to claim for and assistance in filling in forms was brought up by four of the eleven Gypsy and Traveller interviewees as an advice need:

The only thing I needed help with was help filling in forms and benefits. (Unauthorised encampment).

We called the Gypsy support worker when we couldn't get hold of the CAB and that lady actually came round to her home and gave her benefits advice because when she was ill for a while, all her benefits were stopped and she had to put in a new claim."(Gypsy in housing)

In this area, the findings from the current study do not concur with those in the Devon-Wide Gypsy and Traveller Housing Needs Assessment, as there was no expressed desire for any information on benefits. However, the report did recommend the provision of benefits information for all.

- The stakeholders interviewed for this study suggested that contact numbers and points of contact were needs evident in their day to day working with the different groups of Gypsies and Travellers. They highlighted that they supported Gypsies and Travellers by providing contact numbers and information about relevant services, literacy, access to health care, domestic abuse, advocacy in dealing with other agencies and education. Hence they believed that they were resolving needs within the Gypsy and Traveller communities in Plymouth. Clearly from the interviews with Gypsies and Travellers in the area there are advice needs that are not being fulfilled that the CAB would be well situated to provide.

Encouragements

In order to ascertain the best way to provide Gypsies and Travellers with services this study explored encouragements to engage. Many of these good practice examples or suggestions from the Gypsy and Traveller community are interlinked and were implied by either the community itself or the services working with the community. The key encouragements to engagement were:

- Putting a face to a name: knowledge of agency workers
 - Clear explanations
 - Positive outcomes
 - Timely advice
- The importance of services being known to the community on multiple levels, including on a personal basis, was highlighted by the research:

They need notice boards or someone to visit to get the information out, or just even to get the phone numbers out there so the people are aware of the services available.(Gypsy in housing)

We try to engage with Gypsies and Travellers and ensure they know who we are and what we do and also promote ourselves to other agencies. (Stakeholder service)

REC have put together a pack and we give them out as well as REC. (Stakeholder service)

As well as having a telephone number, a common request from Gypsies and Travellers was for services to visit the community and get to know the people so that the Gypsies and Travellers could get to know the services personally and thereby build trust. This was detailed by both Gypsies and Travellers and services who stated that a service did not need to go to the community all the time, but rather, they should engage with the community and gain their trust, followed up by occasional visits to keep in touch. The Gypsies and Travellers wanted to maintain privacy and independence balanced with knowing the service.

The best thing a service can do is make themselves known to us, if we know them then we'll think of them when we need something ya know, if we don't know them, they won't come to our minds when we need something. (L.A site)

The people being friendly and known to you, so I go to REC because I know who they are and they've been helpful before so I know they can help and they know us. (L.A site)

Access is not really a problem, I go there, put forward who I am and what I do, leave them information and offer assistance with things.(Stakeholder service)

The Ride know us, they aren't going anywhere, they come to me if they need me, but normally I pop up there every now and again and we chat about things, if they need anything, if I need to talk to them about anything. (Stakeholder service)

- Relating to the previous point, a known point of contact was deemed important, so that Gypsies and Travellers knew who to contact if required, additional to any regular/occasional community visits from agencies. This known point of contact was seen by Gypsies and Travellers and service providers as a deciding factor in whether a service would be contacted or not. To know who was going to answer the phone and to know they would have some level of understanding of the person calling was regarded as the ideal situation:

If I had a point of contact, then I would definitely, if I was in a caravan or a house like I am now, if I had a point of contact and I knew that person could get information to me quickly, then I wouldn't hesitate to phone.(Gypsy in housing)

It depends on whether you have left a point of contact, so say if I go in and say if you need access to the library, you could call Fiona, they probably would call Fiona if they needed to, but if I go in and just leave literature about the library, then probably they will not. (Stakeholder service)

- Gypsies and Travellers and stakeholders identified the need for services to have a good understanding of the culture of Gypsy and Traveller communities and the issues they face. This issue was linked to the barrier of past experiences of racism and discrimination. If a service was known to be understanding of the Gypsy and Traveller communities, this influenced whether they would use that service over and above any others. The most commonly used services for advice were those that had shown most understanding of the community's issues.

If they knew about us, if they tried to understand us and the way we are and the types of difficulties we face. If they visited up here and saw what we're like and made the effort to support us. (L.A site)

Having constant contact with them, does help you understand the travelling way of life and so I think this is good to try to understand the background, their culture and the issues within the group, what sort of discrimination they face. (Stakeholder service)

It has to be advice that is relevant to their needs, so say if you're giving advice about employment for example, you need to know what sort of advice will be relevant to them really.(Stakeholder service)

- Gypsies and Travellers and stakeholders identified the need for services to explain processes. This was linked to the barrier of Gypsies and Travellers not understanding how services can help and a lack of understanding of the community on the part of services:

Someone to tell you what will happen also, to go through the process, so you know what to expect and you don't feel so lost with what's going on. (L.A site)

People not understanding them and them not understanding the service. Services not communicating on their level, I think is a real difficulty. (Stakeholder service)

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- Services for Gypsies and Travellers should be appropriately accessible according to the research findings. This linked to the barrier of needing a speedy service and experiences of difficulty getting an appointment with CAB, as opposed to getting a response quickly from elsewhere:

It's no good when you're desperate, sometimes you don't have time to wait for that appointment and when I needed help, 2 weeks was too long to wait to see someone. (L.A site)

We couldn't get hold of CAB so we went to his man that we knew that works with gypsies. (Gypsy in housing)

If you leave a message on her phone today, she will ring you back within 24 hours, nothing is left, they're just accessible, it's like this card, I've had this card in my bag for about a year and if I need her, I can phone her anytime and she remembers me. (Gypsy in housing)

I always leave my contact telephone number with them. (Stakeholder service)

- The research found that Gypsies and Travellers were encouraged to utilise services when they had previously had a positive outcome from them. A positive outcome did not necessarily mean that the situation was resolved but that the response that Gypsies and Travellers had received from agencies had been thorough in attempting to resolve an issue.

If you ring REC, they just help, they either sort it out themselves or they phone around until they find someone who can help and they put you onto them so I get everything I need from them, so no need to go anywhere else. (L.A site)

X suggested we got involved, offering a young person help with a driving theory test, so we went out and bought the DVD and helped him through this, it was really successful, worked really well, through the workers contact with him she got to know his family and the other families and this led to some families asking for assistance and support in other areas." (Stakeholder service)

Best practice

- Empowering Gypsy and Traveller communities to deal with issues encouraged them to engage further. From the view point of services working with the community, empowering them to address some of their own issues had reaped positive rewards.

Something we have done is we have worked with a Polish Gypsy young man, who is an amazing break dancer, he goes to schools and uses his dancing to enable him to talk to young people about racism and challenges racism, he tells his own story about his experiences of racism and discrimination. (Stakeholder service)

They produced this DVD about their experiences which they have actually realised is very powerful and they are so empowered by the whole process that they have now started a small fee to take the DVD to schools and do a session to go along with it. (Stakeholder service)

This method of working also echoed the recommendation in the Plymouth Analysis of the Devon-wide Gypsy and Traveller Housing Needs Assessment (Southern and James 2006), that the development of a residents association for residents of The Ride would provide the opportunity for site managers to communicate with the residents and vice versa regarding site issues.

Conclusion

This research has uncovered a number of issues affecting the Gypsy and Traveller Community within the remit of the City of Plymouth. It has provided insights into Gypsy and Traveller engagement with particular services, such as the REC and that provided by the GLO. However, whilst showing some of the reasons why Gypsies and Travellers have not used the CAB to any great extent, the research opens up for scrutiny areas in which the CAB may begin to engage with this group, and indeed with those agencies which are already serving their needs.

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