



Perinatal and maternal mental health services for Gypsies and Travellers:

Improving inclusion and access in West Yorkshire



Commissioned by Leeds and York Partnership Foundation Trust
Delivered by Thrive by Design and Leeds GATE
PATHS & WY Perinatal Mental Health Service

Note: all photos are from the Leeds GATE photo bank. There is no relationship between the people in these photos and this project.

The aim of this resource

For those working in services to increase their awareness and understanding of Gypsy and Traveller communities in perinatal services to support members of these communities.

The following slides include background information on Gypsy and Traveller communities in the UK, and most specifically for those across West Yorkshire. We hope it provides more context as to how people may experience your service and how they want to be supported and engaged with to tackle health inequalities faced by Gypsy and Traveller people.

It also includes findings from a research project delivered by Thrive By Design and Leeds GATE.

We hope that this easily accessible information will increase inclusion and access for these communities to perinatal mental health services.

Engagement

This resource is based on discussions and engagement with Gypsies and Travellers in West Yorkshire, Leeds GATE staff and partners.

The sessions focused on insights and experiences, themes and support accessed/needed.

Sessions with community members were centred around an activity that put people at ease and 'gave back' for sharing their experiences.

Total engagement:

- 21 Leeds GATE staff (43% Gypsy or Traveller)
- 15 Trust staff
- 35 Gypsies and Travellers*

*Approximate figure

How we engaged:

- Site outreach
- One-to-one in people's homes
- Stay and play
- Online survey
- Workshops
- Family boxes - making session
- Flower arranging session
- Baby week programme



Introducing Leeds GATE



Leeds Gypsy & Traveller Exchange is a grassroots organisation led by Gypsy and Traveller people in partnership with others in and across West Yorkshire.

We are here for Gypsies and Travellers.

We aim to improve the quality of life for Gypsies and Travellers through improving access to homes, health, education, employment, and inclusion in society.

Find out more about [our values here](#).



LEEDS GATE WHAT WE DO



We work with members across their life course delivering support and services on things that matter most to them and improve quality of life.

Leeds GATE also works strategically both locally and regionally on issues of inequality, ensuring members voices are heard and Gypsy and Traveller communities are included as equals.

For further info please see: www.leedsgate.co.uk/

LOCAL AUTHORITY GYSPY AND TRAVELLER DATA 2023



5
dedicated sites



134
Pitches/
family
homes

*Need data taken from
West Yorkshire
Accommodation Needs
Assessments

237
homes still
needed

*Population data is taken from 2021 census and widely acknowledged to be a significant undercount.

Roadside

Only between 2-3% of all caravans were on "unauthorised camps" on the roadside in England*

*from Traveller Caravan count statistics up to July 2025 (snapshot counted on one day twice a year)

22% Mobile home or caravan*

*Stat from 2021 Census

Where Gypsy and Traveller people live

On sites (Local Authority run) and privately owned yards

Houses

78% Bricks and Mortar*

*Stat from 2021 Census





Accommodation

Gypsies and Travellers have a long and rich history across West Yorkshire for hundreds of years and continues to this day.

Lee Gap Horse Fair is a traditional Gypsy Traveller Fair still held in Tingley, it was granted a royal charter in 1136.

For decades, enough homes haven't been provided for these communities. Historically people moved around but this became harder and harder.

Most Gypsies and Travellers don't or can no longer live roadside. They are still Gypsies and Travellers because this is their ethnicity not a lifestyle choice. "Travelling" is an important part of their culture and identity.

Gypsies and Travellers

Three Facts



- Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller are recognised as ethnic minority groups in UK law (Race Relations Act 2000 and Equalities Act 2010). Roma are a different group and also a recognised ethnicity.
- The first written reference to Gypsies and Travellers in Leeds can be found in the Parish register of 1572, with the baptism in Leeds Parish Church of Elizabeth Smawlyeye.
- Leeds has third largest Gypsy Traveller population in UK and Bradford has the fifth

Health Inequalities

Gypsies and Travellers face the worst health outcomes compared to other ethnic groups.

(Women and Equalities Committee House of Commons Report 2019)

Average life expectancy of 50 compared to 75 in general population.

(Leeds Baseline Census of Gypsies and Travellers)

Excess prevalence of miscarriages (29% compared with 16% in a matched comparison group), stillbirths, neonatal deaths, and infant mortality

(Aspinall 2014)

Male Irish Travellers were found to be 6 times more likely to die by suicide than the general population.

(All Ireland Traveller Health Study, 2010)

44.6% of adults surveyed by YouGov held negative attitudes to Gypsies and Travellers, making them the “most disliked” of any group. (The Dinner Table Prejudice, 2022)



Outputs

During our research project we:

Gathered community insights

Developed community engagement guidance

Created design principles

Put together recommendations

Held initiatives at Leeds GATE - Baby week, young women's group.

Held partner work e.g. producing accessible information, testing maternal journal and other approaches like baby memory boxes, talking to community members about trauma and the PATHs service.

Findings

- **Need for individual personalised approach**
- **More education needed for staff around Gypsy and Traveller cultural needs.**
- **Crucial importance of relational work and drawing on the strengths of the wider (female) family members especially**
- **Very real and ongoing effects of racism and the need to build trust**
- **Fear around high levels of baby loss**

Themes from research respondents

Respondents were given the freedom to discuss any aspect of their maternity journey throughout the project research.

The three themes that emerged were:

- Communication
- Culture and family
- Mental health and traumatic experiences

The following few slides are the considerations under each theme for working specifically with Gypsies and Travellers.

Theme one: Communication

Feedback we received...:

- Not feeling heard especially in hospital care - we know this is dangerous
- Gypsies and Travellers not likely to attend antenatal classes or know what was on offer
- Being over inquisitive in a way that is not directly relevant to the situation or pointing our difference makes people feel unwelcome
- Faceless referrals make it harder to build trust

...and things members said would help:

- Curiosity must be professional but firstly being caring and kind
- Appointment length matters - people may need a bit more time to explain things
- Thinking about literacy levels - accessible information and using plain English.
- Relational work and reputation matters especially with messages passed on via word of mouth
- Stepping stones model really works (e.g. Leeds GATE model of taking people from advocacy to mental health via relationships with trusted person guiding them through)
- Personalised care

What community members said...

"Members attend appointments with midwives and **have the same midwife in all appointments.** Mostly good feedback about midwives"

"There was one midwife who came back and checked on me after witnessing one of the staff members being judgemental. She was of Asian descent. She was lovely and my mum commented on how nice she was. **She understood the cultural reasons of why I didn't want my partner present at the birth.**"

"Staff aren't **patient or empathetic.**"

"We are savvy. I know as soon as I meet someone if they are treating me different because I am a Gypsy."

"Appointments aren't long so **it makes it hard to get across what I am saying.**"

"The district nurse was nice, didn't seem to judge, and would ask to visit me. **She took me as I am.** She asked me questions about how I was feeling like she was really interested."

Theme two: Culture and Family

Gypsies and Travellers often say to us 'family is everything'. There is lots to celebrate and aspects of culture and family to be aware of when working with the community, especially pregnant women, when it comes to maternity care.

Feedback we received...:

- There is sensitivity in the community around taboo subjects being discussed
- Many Gypsy and Traveller women do not prioritise themselves above their children and there is stigma or shame attached to doing so
- Children are absolutely central to the community
- Sometimes people felt questions about their culture were irrelevant and felt poorly timed rather than focusing on them as a person

Things we were told by members that would help...:

- Be aware and respectful of birthing partner being female relative and not the father of the child
- "Village to raise a child" is a reality for Gypsies and Travellers and is a huge community strength
- Living within your culture is really important as it provides a strong support network
- BUT be mindful of challenges around accommodation. Not being able to live on sites is isolating (members who live in houses can feel this), not having access to accommodation is stressful (if you live roadside)

What community members said...

“**Health professionals could attend existing groups** within the community to share information.”

“**Family is everything.** Having sisters, aunts and mums there to support with the baby.”

“**I didn't know there were (antenatal) classes** but I wouldn't go. It isn't what Travellers do.”

“The community don't want to be overrun with groups and professionals. Need to **take it slow and steady and listen to what people want**”

Theme three: Mental Health and Traumatic Experiences

Though the mental health taboo is slowly changing amongst Gypsies and Travellers, maternal mental health is not as widely understood or talked about. Gypsies and Travellers experience high levels of racial trauma outside of maternity provision which must be given due consideration. Gypsies and Travellers also have avoidable distressing experiences within maternity services, some of which is driven by racism.

Feedback we received...:

- We know maternal mental health is an issue for our members and mental health topics can be taboo (but not always)
- Everyone has an experience of racism and an expectation this will happen
- Statistics from YouGov show Gypsies and Travellers are the most hated group in society. Why would we assume healthcare staff think differently unless we've done the work?
- People have experiences of traumatic deliveries, there are communication issues
- People have experienced trauma and baby/child loss to a higher degree so they are scared and worried
- People have greater experiences of loss in general (from lower average life expectancy and multiple bereavements) so can be scared and worried
- People have recent historic experiences of forced removal of children (over representation of Gypsy and Traveller children in the care system), so they are fearful of interventions from services "If I tell them I am struggling with my mental health, they will take my baby away." (see [Scottish Government 'Tinker Experiments'](#) for further info)

Theme three: Mental Health and Traumatic Experiences continued

Members did not focus on solutions too much here, but from our experience in Leeds GATE here's some things that make a difference:

- **Starting to successfully refer into other services such as PATHS - more specialist communications from and to these services**
- **We have a mental health service for Gypsies and Travellers. Though not maternal mental health specifically it's an opportunity to engage members in those areas**
- **More needs to be done to recognise the unique experiences of Gypsy and Traveller women in broader enquiries and strategies for maternity service provision**
- **Gentler approach that is taken in community groups and 1-2-1 appointments to introduce and explore these themes**
- **Inclusion of Gypsies and Travellers in broader strategies around racism and discrimination**

Community members said...

"Partnerships e.g. PATHS (existing), Family Action in Bradford **referrals made and had good feedback.**"

"The community doesn't often want to go to the doctors if they worry they are ill. Adults wait until it is really bad then go to A&E. **This isn't the case with their babies or children.**"

"**I didn't know** that things could go wrong and **birth could be so upsetting.**"

"**I wouldn't share** if I was having **problems**, we are **supposed to be strong** that way."

"Mum was there when I had the baby but **I didn't really know what to expect.** No one talks about that bit."

Our next steps

As a result of this work we have:

- Formed a steering group of Leeds GATE staff and members.
- Nominated a small number of strategic partners (perinatal area services and WY service) to be involved in the work long-term.
- Partners get to know us and the community, work with the steering group and be a champion across the health system.
- Next steps to be decided through this group.

ACTION SUGGESTIONS FROM OUR RESEARCH

Breaking down the taboo of maternal mental health problems.

Giving pregnant Gypsies and Travellers information on what to expect during labour.

Preparing pregnant Gypsies and Travellers for birth being potentially upsetting and complicated.

Knowing where they can go for support if they had a traumatic birth.

Raising awareness of anti-natal classes.

Creating and trying out our own version of anti-natal classes.

Raising awareness of mum and baby groups.

Having Gypsy Traveller mum and tots groups.

Training maternity professionals and raising awareness that Gypsies and Travellers don't access antenatal and groups etc.

Advocating for members who have experienced discrimination in the maternity system.

This list is with the steering group to decide which suggestions to take forward. Please get in touch with us if you want to introduce any new initiatives so that we can co-ordinate and work together to ensure the community is served but not overloaded with change all at once.

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