

# Gypsies/Travellers

## The Myths/ The Facts



This myth-busting leaflet aims to dispel some common myths surrounding the lives of Gypsies and Travellers, and attempts to enhance understanding of those working and providing services to Gypsies and Traveller communities, about their rich traditions and culture.

There are several different groups of Gypsies and Travellers living in the UK, including Romani Gypsies, Irish, Welsh, English and Scottish Travellers. There are also other groups such as New Travellers, and Circus and Showmen's families. It is at least 500 years since Romani Gypsies arrived in Britain, and 200 years since Irish Travellers first came here.

Some cultural values and traditions are shared, including a history of nomadism or living on sites in family groups. Compared to settled communities, they experience a higher level of discrimination and prejudice in their daily lives, and great difficulty in maintaining their lifestyle and heritage. They are often disadvantaged when accessing health care, education, and secure accommodation. Life expectancy is significantly lower than the national average.

Under the Equality Act 2010 all public bodies have a duty to promote equality for Gypsies and Travellers. Under this act, Romani Gypsies and Irish Travellers have the protected characteristic of 'race'. However, New Travellers and Circus/Showmen's families are not considered as Ethnic Minority under the Equality Act.

### Myth 1: 'Gypsies and Travellers have an easy life style'

**The Reality:** Contrary to popular perception and belief that Gypsies and Travellers live romantic and care free lives of their choice, the reality is they are more prone to ill-health than any other groups, are two to five times more likely to have health problems, and have a life expectancy of 10-12 years less than the settled population. The levels of pre-natal mortality, still births and loss of a child are also higher<sup>1</sup>. Lack of understanding of their culture and needs combined with insecure accommodation can make it difficult for Gypsies and Travellers to access and receive healthcare<sup>2</sup>.

For further information please visit [www.wales.gov.uk/gypsytravellers](http://www.wales.gov.uk/gypsytravellers)



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## Myth 2: 'Gypsies and Travellers don't want to work'

**The Reality:** Gypsies and Travellers are not work shy and often start work younger, with traditional skills being passed down to the next generation. There is a strong work ethic, based on the need to survive. They have been part of European society for centuries, practising a range of occupations including metal-work, small-scale trading and seasonal agricultural work. Many Gypsies and Travellers in employment do not disclose their ethnicity for fear of discrimination.

## Myth 3: 'Gypsies and Travellers don't pay tax'

**The Reality:** Being a Gypsy and Traveller does not mean you are more likely to avoid paying taxes than anyone else. Gypsies and Travellers pay road tax, VAT on goods and services, and income tax when working or self-employed. They pay council tax, rent, licence fees and other utility charges on settled sites. Public sites are funded through rent collected from residents, and in some cases the rents payable are more than that for the local authority housing. Many Gypsies and Travellers without a fixed address are unable to open a bank account or register as self-employed.

## Myth 4: 'A Traveller site ruins the surrounding area and they don't care about society'

**The Reality:** Where official settled sites are provided, positive community relations develop e.g. there are very few complaints about the Swansea Ty Gwyn site since it was built. Many Gypsies and Travellers want to engage with the wider community and promote mutual understanding. Some may be more reluctant to engage due to discrimination, negative experiences or a fear that services would seek to assimilate Gypsies and Traveller without consideration for the loss of culture. A detailed study in Wales found variability in the demand for sites, with some oversubscribed, several needing substantial repairs, a lack of play spaces on most sites, and the importance of consulting residents over improvements schemes <sup>3</sup>.

## Myth 5: 'Gypsies and Travellers are dirty'

**The Reality:** Gypsies and Travellers take great pride in cleanliness, and have strict rules and customs of personal hygiene and cleanliness, which also function as principles for living. These include all activities from handling the dishes, cutlery and food to washing clothes. A quarter of Gypsies and Travellers are homeless, having no legal or permanent site, and so may have no rubbish collection or other facilities provided. It has been found that provision of proper sites works out cheaper and more sustainable than enforcement and cleaning up operations.

<sup>1</sup>The Health Status of Gypsies and Travellers in England: A report to the Department of Health (University of Sheffield - 2004).

<sup>2</sup>At What Cost? The Economics of Gypsy and Traveller Encampments (L Clements and R Morris, Policy Press 2002).

<sup>3</sup>Niner, P. (2006) Accommodation needs of Gypsy-Travellers in Wales. Report to the Welsh Assembly Government. Birmingham: Centre for Urban and Regional Studies.