

**Submission to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)
on the Right to Adequate Housing of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers:
Discrimination and Homelessness on the streets of London
for the review of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland at the 77th
session (10 Feb 2025 - 28 Feb 2025)**

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In this report:

- **Introduction: Racial discrimination with regards to the right to adequate housing in London**
- **Homeless families: Increasingly in inadequate temporary accommodation**
 - **Enfield local authority: example of an escalating homelessness crisis**
- **Recommendations**

Summary

The fulfilment of the right to housing, in London, discriminated against racially minoritized groups. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families remained trapped in substandard homeless shelters, many of them for years. Gypsies and Travellers have the right to live in specialist housing aligned with their cultural heritage and preference for nomadism, yet no additional Gypsy or Traveller site has been built in London since 1996, two local authority sites were closed, and there has never been a dedicated site for Gypsy and Traveller families living on the road. This neglect forced Gypsies and Travellers to become homeless, consequently living in inadequate “bricks and mortar” temporary accommodation, overcrowding or in unauthorized encampments. Roma families were disproportionately placed into temporary accommodation with no kitchens, which worsened their deprivation. Homeless Roma families found it more difficult to regularize their residency status in the UK, and were denied homelessness services as a result, thereby pushing them to live on the street. Enfield Council, as an example among many local authorities in London, failed to communicate clearly with providers of emergency and temporary accommodation, to prevent street homelessness.

Urgent investment is required into adequate social housing, with a duty to allocate a percentage to specialist accommodation that is culturally suitable to people of nomadic heritage. Standards of temporary accommodation must be raised to include safety, cooking and washing facilities at a minimum. Local authorities should communicate effectively with Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, as well as with other minoritized and socially excluded users of homelessness services, in particular by using translators and face-to-face communication.

- Introduction: Racial discrimination with regards to the right to adequate housing in London

The housing crisis in London is a result of accumulated governmental policies that give rise to discrimination against racially minoritized groups. Among these groups, Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are acutely affected. Social housing is provided in the UK by local authorities. According to the National Audit Office (NAO), central government funding for local authorities fell in real terms by more than 50% on a like-for-like basis between 2010-11 and 2020-21.¹ As a result, local authorities cut spending on housing, planning and development services by more than 35%.² Government figures for 2020 showed that in London, White British households were less likely to rent social housing than households from all other ethnic groups.³ Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are members of recognised ethnic groups which are protected from racial discrimination. These ethnic groups (Gypsies, Roma and Travellers being in themselves umbrella terms for a number of different groups) share a protected characteristic, which is a culture and heritage of nomadism. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) analysed in 2023 that Gypsies and Travellers are more than twice as likely than the national average to live in accommodation rented from local authorities (42.3% compared with 16.6%).⁴ Of the 1,264 Gypsy and Traveller households who live on caravan pitches in London, 655 are tenants in sites provided by local authorities.⁵ Therefore, racially minoritized groups and especially Gypsies and Travellers are more likely to be affected by the cuts to local authorities' funds, resulting in inadequate housing.

According to the Evidence for Equality National Survey report published in 2023, Roma experienced the highest proportion of discrimination in relation to seeking housing of any ethnic group in the UK.⁶ The proportion of Roma in social rented accommodation was lower (9%) than Gypsies and Travellers, while a disproportionate number was in private rental accommodation (75% compared with the national average of 21%).⁷ Ability to access housing services was low among Roma communities, for example 64% of Roma surveyed in the London-wide GTANA reported being unable or usually unable to access temporary accommodation from their local authority.⁸ The shift towards 'digital by default' public services and digital only immigration status, made it more difficult for Roma to access local authority housing services. *Roma Support Group* research published in June 2024 found that while the majority of Roma surveyed owned a mobile phone, only 9% had access to Wi-Fi, 20% to mobile internet, and none owned a laptop or tablet.⁹ As well as poor access to technology, many Roma also lack the skills needed to effectively use digital devices. This digital exclusion is exacerbated by low literacy and English language skills. The combination of these barriers makes it extremely difficult for many Roma to access services which were increasingly accessed digitally.

Immigration status policies created unjustified and inconsistent obstacles to accessing housing. Since post-Brexit immigration system rules came into force, EU citizens needed to prove immigration status to access UK public services, including local authority housing services. This could only be done digitally, by providing a share code. *Roma Support Group* research showed that over 70% of Roma were unable to prove their EU settlement status if asked.¹⁰ This created another barrier to accessing public services, and resulted in those in need of support from their local authority being unable to access it. Gatekeeping by local authorities provides additional barrier to Roma accessing housing services. While those with settled status were entitled to access support (if they were able to prove their status), not all of those with pre-settled status were eligible. Eligibility of those with pre-settled status depended on proving 'right to reside' e.g. being a worker, self-employed, or victim of domestic violence. However, often local authority housing advisors refused support to those with pre-settled status, without making the necessary queries to properly

assess their eligibility. For example, a Roma victim of domestic violence lost her accommodation after being told to leave the family member's flat she was staying in. She approached the local authority emergency out-of-hours team for support but was refused due to having pre-settled status, despite having a right to reside, as her eligibility was not thoroughly assessed. After travelling to another local authority and presenting as homeless, she was refused support due to having no local connection, despite being eligible. To prevent homelessness, the woman had no other choice but to move back in with her abuser.

Homelessness and poor standards of temporary accommodation in London violated the right to adequate housing. The NAO calculated that, since 2010, private sector rents increased eight times as much as median earnings in London (and three times as much as median earnings in England overall).¹¹ For too many people living in poverty, and especially for members of racially minoritized groups, the cost of living and the lack of social housing led to statutory homelessness. While 31% of people experiencing homelessness in England and Wales were from racially minoritized communities, these communities made up only 14% of the total population.¹² Homeless households in London had an average stay in temporary accommodation five times longer than elsewhere in England.¹³ Around 50% of temporary accommodation in London was found to contain safety hazards and vermin infestations, and most are overcrowded.¹⁴ One in 23 children in London lived in temporary accommodation in 2023-24.¹⁵ Twelve babies and young children died in London, with temporary accommodation a contributing factor in their death, in 2019-24.¹⁶ *London Gypsies and Travellers'* research with 56 Gypsy, Roma and Traveller households experiencing homelessness in inner London found that in 2022-23, half were driven into homelessness because of inadequate housing provision, and four said that they had experienced direct discrimination on racial grounds in their access to housing services.¹⁷ 48% of people surveyed by *Roma Support Group* in the context of advocacy for access to health services stated that they have concerns and problems related to poor housing conditions and other housing problems.¹⁸

The ONS found in 2023 that women, young people and people from ethnic minority backgrounds were more likely to experience hidden homelessness (meaning that they did not access support from local authorities at all, however inadequate it may have been). Data for London for 2021/22 shows that Black African, Caribbean, White Other, Roma and Gypsy Traveller groups were all disproportionately more likely to be sleeping rough.¹⁹

- **Homeless families: Increasingly in inadequate temporary accommodation**

Temporary accommodation standards were inadequate, particularly with regards to space for children and the amenities to provide food. Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in London had high percentages of households suffering from overcrowding (32.6% for Gypsies and Travellers, 26% for Roma,²⁰ in contrast to 19.6% average for London and 8% nationally).²¹ In areas such as Harrow, Sheffield and Derby more than half of Roma lived in overcrowded accommodation.²² *London Gypsies and Travellers'* research into homelessness in 2022-23 found three generations of a family living in one caravan, with parents and a 3-month-old baby forced to sleep on the floor.²³ Temporary accommodation frequently lacked kitchens and the only sanitary facilities were shared, posing privacy and safeguarding problems for children especially. Research conducted in 2023 in the framework of the London-wide GTANA found that **2% of Gypsies and Travellers surveyed in London were living in "non-self-contained" temporary accommodation, which are hostels and bedsits without kitchens.**²⁴ This was 10 times the average rate for Londoners overall.²⁵ The

same research found that **4% of Roma surveyed in London were living in “non-self-contained” temporary accommodation**, at a rate 20 times higher than the London average.²⁶

Nomadism was punished by homelessness. Roadside families that had nowhere to make authorized stops were in effect homeless. In January 2024, 377 Gypsy and Traveller caravans were standing on unauthorized sites in London,²⁷ reflecting some of the unmet need for specialist accommodation.²⁸ The last published London-wide Gypsy and Traveller accommodation needs assessment identified the need for 40 transit pitches in London in 2008,²⁹ and there was still no transit site in 2024. Several London local authorities stated that they had no intention of providing transit sites or short-term caravan standing places.³⁰ Fifteen London local authorities have tried to institute bans on Gypsies and Travellers stopping in their localities.³¹ The stated reason was that visiting Gypsies and Travellers were expected to engage in prohibited waste disposal,³² an expectation that in itself betrayed racist attitudes. Under the power of the ban in just one local authority in east London, on 12 April 2021, Traveller families in eight caravans were evicted from Bretons Outdoor Recreation Centre, and eight additional caravans were stopped by the Metropolitan police which reported that the evicted Travellers were “in the majority, amicable” and “keen to find out where they could go without being moved on”; and on 8 June 2022, Traveller families residing in three caravans were evicted within hours from Upminster Rugby Fields.³³ Such blanket bans, referred to as wide injunctions against persons unknown, were found in 2020 by the Court of Appeal to be inadmissible because they failed to meet welfare and housing needs.³⁴ In 2023 the Supreme Court judged that injunctions violated Gypsies and Travellers’ rights when issued in the context of the absence of transit sites.³⁵ Nevertheless, one London local authority continued to maintain such an injunction in 2025³⁶ and another London borough obtained a new injunction in November 2024.³⁷ In the inner London study for 2022-23, *London Gypsies and Travellers* found one 23-year-old single man living in his caravan on an unauthorized pitch for 15 months, whose hidden homelessness was inadequately solved by his being compelled to sell his caravan and move into temporary “bricks and mortar” accommodation.³⁸ **Rather than being constantly moved on, at risk of arrest and of having their caravan homes impounded, Gypsies and Travellers have resorted to accessing local authority homelessness services.**

○ **Enfield local authority: example of an escalating homelessness crisis**

In the course of 2024, the situation for social tenants experiencing homelessness in the London Borough of Enfield, a local authority in northeast London, deteriorated rapidly. More than a third of the new and escalating homelessness cases that approached *London Gypsies and Travellers* in 2024 were living in Enfield (33 cases in temporary accommodation out of 88 throughout London from January to October). Two families were told to move hundreds of kilometres out of London, or else be considered ineligible for homelessness services. In 2024, the Greater London Authority’s application portal for Affordable Homes Programme funding was inoperative, which resulted in the stalling of housing projects.³⁹ In Enfield, lack of funding resulted in delays to the construction of a transit site for nomadic families making stops in the area.⁴⁰

An elderly Roma couple was subject to a no-fault eviction, and were temporarily housed in a hotel by Enfield Council. They were moved from hotel to hotel, until without warning they were told to vacate their hotel room and were made street homeless in 2024. A charity providing assistance discovered that Enfield Council had closed their homelessness case, claiming that an offer of interim accommodation had been

refused by the couple. The couple were unaware of any offer being made. When contacted by the local Member of Parliament, which required significant campaigning investment, the Council claimed that the couple had never been provided with temporary accommodation that had been cancelled. The situation in Enfield – where housing practices such as placements in distant locations or in accommodation without kitchens, and ineffective communication of changes to policies and tenancies, were provided by overstretched and under-resourced officers who faced mounting demands – was characteristic of homelessness services across London.

- *London Gypsies and Travellers' and Roma Support Group's Recommendations*

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights described “adequate” housing as having the following elements in terms of available services, materials, facilities and infrastructure: “An adequate house must contain certain facilities essential for health, security, comfort and nutrition. All beneficiaries of the right to adequate housing should have sustainable access to natural and common resources, safe drinking water, energy for cooking, heating and lighting, sanitation and washing facilities, means of food storage, refuse disposal, site drainage and emergency services.”⁴¹ Our organisations have found that homeless shelters provided to Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in London largely did not meet these standards, and members of these groups are disproportionately driven to homelessness.

There are some 40,000 Gypsies and Travellers living in London and 38,000 Roma, and though these communities are relatively small in numerical terms, the multiple challenges they face are enormous.⁴² In the context of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller social exclusion, members of these communities suffer suicide rates many times higher than the national average.⁴³ *London Gypsies and Travellers and Roma Support Group* propose that resolving the shortage of decent social housing, of which a proportion be culturally suitable accommodation, is the keystone for building a path out of decades of discrimination.

We have found that local and regional authorities are not taking sufficient steps to address the root of the problem, by improving provision of social housing, and are also not delivering homelessness services to the necessary standard. The only local authority in London to utilize the government’s Traveller Site Fund was the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, which spent £78,909 (USD 100,143) in 2022 on refurbishing a communal space at the Stable Way Traveller Site, though the residents had asked for the site to be expanded so as to accommodate additional caravans. Stable Way Site was overcrowded and wedged under a dual carriageway overpass where seven major roads and a railway line intersect.⁴⁴ £485,000 (USD 615,513) from the available fund were not spent at all.⁴⁵

Recommendations to the United Kingdom’s national authorities:

- Immediately invest in social housing so as to increase the proportion of social rented housing to a target of 35% of the total housing stock in London, of which 1% should be specialist housing that is culturally suitable for Gypsies and Travellers’ nomadic heritage.
- Reform the regulation of the rental sector so that affordability, decent accommodation standards, and security of tenure are instituted without discrimination on racial grounds.
- Ensure that housing provisions allow for temporary accommodation to be accessed only as a last resort and within the statutory limits.

To the Greater London Authority:

- Establish sites in the four corners of London that will accommodate at least 40 pitched caravans for short-term stays.
- Lead on the formation of regional negotiated or permitted stopping arrangements so as to accommodate nomadic Gypsy and Traveller families in caravans.
- Introduce a moratorium on evictions of nomadic Gypsy and Traveller families until there are sufficient permitted stopping places.

To local authorities in London:

- Stop putting people in temporary accommodation that is in poor condition, not accessible or safe and located away from community and support networks.
- Ensure that all temporary accommodation contain the following amenities:
 - cooking facilities
 - WiFi
 - laundry
 - storage
- Provide information in understandable format to service users who are digitally excluded, struggle with reading and writing, and/or require translation, by delivering information in hard copy letters, or in face-to-face meetings with suitable interpreters where necessary.
- Suspend wide injunctions against persons unknown until all conditions stipulated by the Court of Appeal in 2020 and the Supreme Court in 2023 are met, especially the establishment of suitable permitted stopping places and transit sites.
- Act urgently on the duty to provide adequate specialist housing for Gypsies and Travellers in the form of new sites including transit sites and negotiated stopping arrangements designed in consultation with Gypsy and Traveller communities living in the area.

Endnotes

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