

This statement is submitted on behalf of Morecambe Bay Poverty Truth Commission (MBPTC)ⁱ in support of the proposal before Lancaster City Council to take ownership of Mellishaw Park Gypsy and Traveller site and to make the necessary investment to improve the site (so that it meets the conditions laid out in the Mobile Homes Act (1983)).

I am a Professor of Sociology at Lancaster University with expertise in the health and social inequalities that affect the lives of Gypsies and Travellers in Britain. I am also a civic commissioner on *Morecambe Bay Poverty Truth Commission*. I have been asked to speak on behalf of MBPTC, and on behalf of two members of the Mellishaw community who are part of the local commission.ⁱⁱ

Mellishaw Park has existed as a residential site for Gypsy and Traveller families since 1982, before which it was a stopping site (for as long as anybody can remember). It has 19 hard-standing pitches for static caravans. About 80 people currently live at Mellishaw, including around 30 children and many elderly people. Several residents have chronic physical and mental health problems. Many families have lived there for decades, some for the entirety of their lives.

The community at Mellishaw are Irish Travellers. They are not Irish, but have Irish ancestry. Irish Travellers have formed a distinct ethnic group in the British Isles for about 400 years. Estimates suggest about 15,000 Irish Travellers live in the UK (of a total 300,000 Gypsy, Roma and Traveller population). The Mellishaw Travellers are as "local" as anybody else who are residents of our local area. The provisions of the Equality Act (2010) mean that, in theory, they are legally protected against discrimination.

In 2019, the UK Government's cross-party 'Women and Equalities Commission' examined the inequalities faced by GRT communities.ⁱⁱⁱ In its own submission the Government accepted that, 'Gypsies, Travellers and Roma are among the most disadvantaged people in the country and have poor outcomes in key areas such as health and education'.^{iv} There is a growing body of evidence about the health inequalities effecting GRT communities. For example, the rate of suicides among Traveller women is significantly higher than the general population, and life expectancy is low for both women and men, with one third of Travellers dying before the age of 59. Health inequalities are more pronounced in deprived areas and are worsening. A 2019 study undertaken by Leeds City Council revealed that GRT people in Leeds have an average life expectancy of 50 years of age, compared to the settled population of around 78 years.^v With these shocking mortality statistics in mind, the MBPTC has worked with the Morecambe Bay Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to set up a Traveller health group to address the health needs of the Mellishaw community.

Other key problems include:

- lack of access to secure accommodation
- lack of secure or well-paid employment
- discrimination or lack of access to criminal justice and legal services.

Prejudice against GRT communities is widespread.^{vi} Racism towards GRT people is not only higher than towards any other minority group, but is markedly more aggressive, and is considered by many to be socially justified. It is estimated that 90% of Gypsy and Traveller children have suffered racial abuse. Fortunately, the children at Mellishaw are very settled in primary school (they all attend St Joseph's in Heysham) and do not experience racism at school.

In March 2019, Kate Green, chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Gypsies, Travellers and Roma described the 'offensive and derogatory language' currently being used 'to describe these groups in public life and in the media', including by the politicians who are supposed to represent them.^{vii} While the Public Sector Equality Duty 'is clear that public bodies have a duty to have due

regard to advancing equality and fostering good relations between protected groups', there remains 'a conspicuous lack of due regard for the needs of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities'.^{viii} They are 'poorly served by policy-makers and public services', and their voices are rarely included in decision-making.^{ix} Exclusion has got worse with austerity cuts. Decisions to defund specialist services designed to meet the needs of these communities aren't greeted with the same kinds of public outcry which meet cuts to other groups.

Since Lancashire County Council's proposal to sell Mellishaw, this community has been living under the shadow of eviction. Pretty much everything of value which the families own is invested in their static caravans on the site. They have nowhere to move their homes to if, for example, they are required to leave when the site is sold to a private land-owner and they are forced out. This is a reasonable fear; recent evidence shows that when local authorities have sold sites to private landlords, families have been forced off due to steep increases in rent, or additional and unrealistic terms and conditions. In some cases, previously council-run GRT sites have become park homes, housing elderly tenants from the wider community, with Traveller families forced onto the road leading to an increase in unauthorised encampments.

Mellishaw residents have told me that uncertainty about their future has created significant stress, worsening health problems. As an elderly lady, who suffers from early-stage dementia stated to me on a recent visit to Mellishaw, '*they are going to turn me out. Where will I go?*' She has lived on the site for over 30 years and tells me that she is '*too old to survive a life by the side of the road*'. This lady is currently cared for by her adult daughter and grandchildren who live in a neighbouring caravan.

Another Traveller member of MBPTC notes:

We were given a plot on Mellishaw ten years ago...and before that we were living on the side of the road...I pray that we do not end up back on the side of the road. That kind of life is hard now. We were evicted and moved on all the time and getting water and electricity – things that settled people take for granted – was hard. It was hard to get your children into school. In winter it was even harder.

We also don't want to be put off here and forced to move into [bricks and mortar] housing.... We don't want to live in a house. We would rather go back on the side of the road than move to a house. We feel stressed and closed in in a house. It's not our culture.^x

Travellers forced to move into bricks-and-mortar housing suffer from depression, isolation, and worsening health. There is also a severe national shortage of official sites, which has led to an increase in the number of unauthorised caravan sites. Our own local Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment reveals a need for further pitches. Since the 1980s, two thirds of traditional, informal stopping sites for Travellers have been closed. Further, proposals by the current Government aim to give police new powers to confiscate vehicles and mobile homes from 'anyone whom they suspect to be trespassing on land with the purpose of residing on it'.^{xi}

GRT communities are facing a more hostile environment than ever before. However, there are signs of more progressive approaches being adopted elsewhere; in 2019, the Scottish Government launched a £3m action plan to tackle the discrimination and challenges faced by GRT communities, boosting resources for local authorities to improve accommodation and sites.^{xii} As the Scottish Equalities Minister stated, it is important that these communities feel 'safe and respected and know they are valued members of Scotland's diverse cultural heritage.'^{xiii}

MBPTC would like to see a similar progressive approach adopted here. Our area is home to one of the largest settled Irish Traveller Communities in the UK, and Lancaster City Council has an opportunity to signal that this community is included in local planning, echoing the Eden Project's motto that, 'Inclusive communities are better communities'.

The families at Mellishaw need the support of their City Council. At present very small amounts of public money are spent on serving this self-sufficient part of our local community. Furthermore, re-housing a community full of children, elderly and sick people, would certainly outweigh the costs of allowing them to remain living on this small piece of land, even with the improvements which have to be made. The Mellishaw community are simply asking that they be treated in the same way as other residents in council-run or owned accommodation.

One of the Mellishaw community asked me to relay these words to you: *'We are the same as you, human like you. Please listen, please save our homes and help us make a better future for our children'*.

Thank you for listening.

ⁱ MBPTC is composed of around a dozen people who have or are experiencing poverty, as well as a similar number of civic decision-makers, including local representatives from groups such as the police force, the fire service, local schools, GPs, United Utilities, Stagecoach, DWP, Food Bank, Citizens Advice, extending to members of the City Council (politicians and civil servants). We believe that people with lived experiences of poverty should have a voice and agency in decision-making, and that small-scale local change can improve lives.

ⁱⁱ Representatives from the Mellishaw community are active members of the MBPTC. Those of you who attended the MBPTC launch event at Lancaster City Hall in July 2018 may remember women and children from Mellishaw speaking about poor living conditions on the site.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities: Government and Ofsted response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2017–19, Women and Equalities Committee, 2019 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/2411/2411.pdf>

^{iv} Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities: Government and Ofsted response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2017–19, Women and Equalities Committee, 2019 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/2411/2411.pdf>

^v Liz Bailey, 2019, Health Needs Assessment of Gypsies, Travellers and Roma Groups in Leeds 2019, <https://observatory.leeds.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/GTR-HNA-post-consultation-June-2019.pdf>

^{vi} Developing a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination in Britain, Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018, <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/national-barometer-of-prejudice-and-discrimination-in-britain.pdf>

^{vii} Kate Green, 2019, <https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/social-affairs/house/house-magazine/103895/kate-green-discrimination-and-abuse-against>

^{viii} Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities: Government and Ofsted response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2017–19, Women and Equalities Committee, 2019 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/2411/2411.pdf>

^{ix} Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities: Government and Ofsted response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2017–19, Women and Equalities Committee, 2019 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/2411/2411.pdf>

^x 'Lancashire Travellers worried about losing homes as council set to consult on site sell-off' *Traveller Times*, 2019 <https://www.travellerstimes.org.uk/news/2019/02/lancashire-travellers-worried-about-losing-homes-council-set-consult-site-sell>

^{xi} Strengthening police powers to tackle unauthorised encampments, Home Office, 2019 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/844954/Unauthorised_Encampments_-_consultation_paper.pdf

^{xii} Improving Gypsy/Traveller lives, Scottish Government, 2019 <https://www.gov.scot/news/improving-gypsytraveller-lives/>

^{xiii} Improving Gypsy/Traveller lives, Scottish Government, 2019 <https://www.gov.scot/news/improving-gypsytraveller-lives/>