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'CONSISTENCY WITH ENGAGEMENT' – LIAISON BETWEEN POLICE AND GYPSY, ROMA, AND TRAVELLER COMMUNITIES IN THE UK



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summary: Despite vibrant cultures and a recent trend of ethnogenesis, Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) groups experience some of the worst outcomes of any ethnic groups in the UK. Policing practice, such as enforcement of legislation which criminalises aspects of GRT cultures, often exacerbates these inequalities. This paper seeks to examine the nature of police liaison with GRT groups in the UK, to explore whether this liaison is focused upon enforcement or engagement, and to discuss the importance of trust within the liaison mechanism. Although its implications are still to be tested via evidence from GRT service users themselves, the paper is able to provide key themes for policing organisations to consider when designing service provision for GRT groups.

Key considerations for policy or practice:

1. Policing organisations should consider a strategic approach to GRT engagement.
2. Liaison should acknowledge that Gypsies, Roma, and Traveller groups are part of broader communities, and that some policing behaviour risks isolating GRT communities.
3. Policing organisations should work towards developing social contracts with GRT groups that lay out the purpose of liaison and what GRT groups can expect from officers and staff.

INTRODUCTION

The Traveller Movement (2023) estimates that 300,000 Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers reside in the UK. Of these, 100,000 live on sites, while 200,000 reside in permanent, 'bricks and mortar' housing. Each group under this Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) umbrella retains its own identity, although the Travellers Aid Trust (2012) argue that cultural identifiers such as an affinity with nomadism and strong oral traditions are common. The grouping of multiple ethnicities such as Scottish Travellers, Roma, and Kale is not without controversy, but Lhussier, Carr, and Forster (2015) note that this grouping is common in policy making, and as such stakeholder practice tends to be uniform across many groups.

This paper will explore how UK policing organisations organise and deliver liaison with GRT groups. It will explore the perspectives of those carrying out liaison, a subset of the many officers and staff who interact with Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers on a daily basis. I will explore how GRT liaison is structured in the UK, the nexus of enforcement and liaison within the liaison role, and the importance of trust. The broader complexities of police interactions with GRT communities are not within the scope of this paper.

Effective liaison with GRT groups can play a part in improving the lives of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities, many of whom are associated with poorer outcomes. MacLennan et al. (2017, p. 6) state that although many members of these groups can be 'high achievers with university degrees', formal education levels tend to be lower than for other groups. Siebelt et al. (2017) state that GRT communities are less likely to access healthcare than the non-GRT population, whilst life expectancy and child death rates are poorer than for any other ethnicities in the UK (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009).

In many cases public sector practice, including that of policing organisations, contributes to the poorer outcomes experienced by Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers. Local authority provision of transit and stopping sites, used by generations of mobile Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers to facilitate mobility, is negligible in many areas (Amnesty International, 2012; Lomax et al., 2004). The lack of such sites contributes to GRT groups having to live on unauthorised or temporary encampments if they wish to continue nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyles. This in turn leaves them vulnerable to prosecution under legislation which limit aspects of the mobility emphasised in GRT cultures. Police enforcement of this legislation can contribute to Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers being unable to register for services such as education and healthcare, further contributing to existing inequalities. Police officers and staff are uniquely placed to influence the wellbeing of GRT communities, having both the power to criminalise those using temporary sites, and the ability to identify and address the vulnerabilities Gypsies, Roma, and Traveller's experience.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

To explore service provision across the UK, I developed a questionnaire with the assistance of academics, a police officer, and a Nawken (Scottish Traveller). I sent this questionnaire to chief constables in every UK territorial policing service, including British Transport Police, asking them to forward it to a Gypsy Roma Traveller Liaison Officer (GRTLO) or, where such a role did not exist, a policing employee who might be expected to liaise with GRT communities as part of their regular duties.

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Forty-eight respondents from twenty-nine police forces returned questionnaires. One respondent asked that direct quotes not be used – this was respected. Two participants indicated that they were dissatisfied with either the briefing materials or the use to which their data would be put. These responses were excluded from the data, leaving me with forty-six participants as detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Research participants

| Rank | Number of respondents |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Constable | 16 |
| Sergeant | 11 |
| Inspector | 7 |
| Chief Inspector | 3 |
| Civilian | 8 |
| Unspecified | 1 |

Police forces were pseudonymised and references to locations were redacted. Although the sample was small, its purposive nature meant that considerations generated from the data remain relevant for policing practice across the UK.

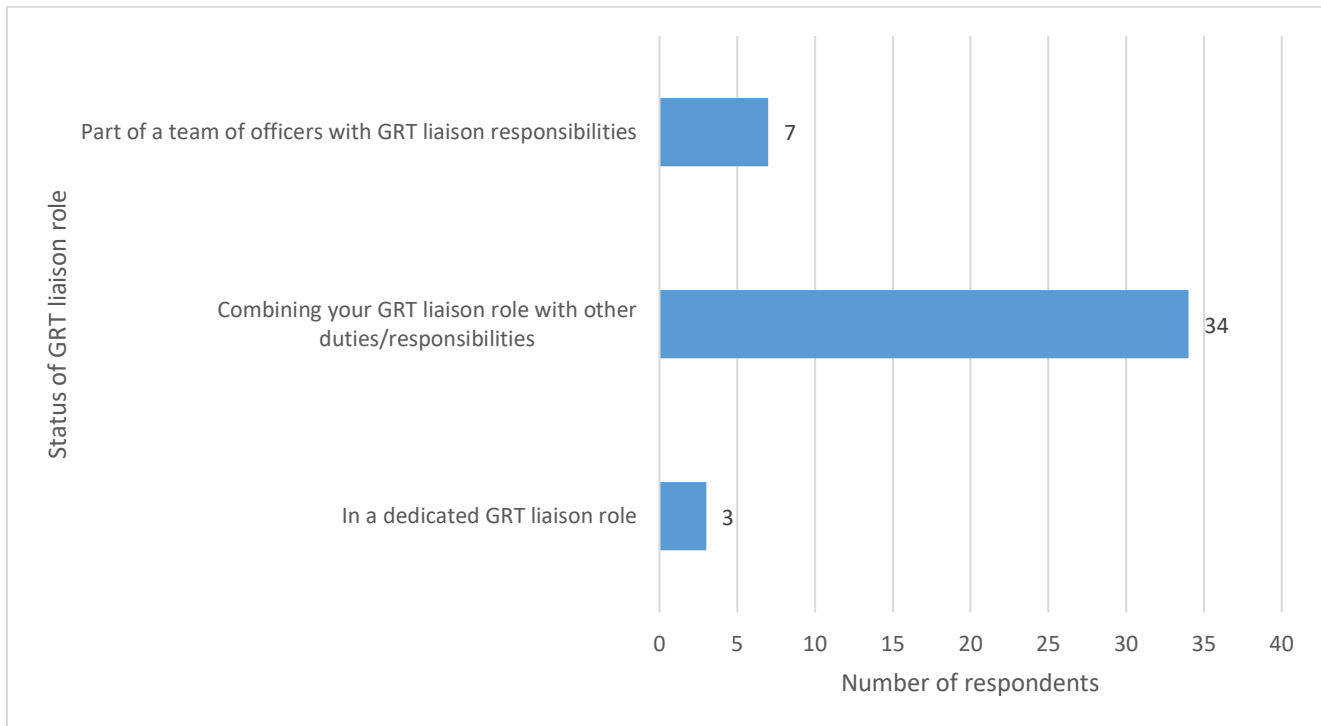
KEY FINDINGS

Policing interaction with Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers takes place primarily at the interface of sedentarism and nomadism. Police effectiveness is judged partially on how effectively they control a geographical area (James, 2006), whilst GRT cultures value mobility, even if many Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers live in 'bricks and mortar' housing (Tammi and Cadger, 2017). Liaison takes place predominantly either through community or neighbourhood policing, or through a specified liaison function, a role recommended by Amnesty International (2012). Within this research, officers and staff carrying out liaison were described as Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Liaison Officers (GRTLTOs), regardless of whether they were in specified liaison roles.

WHO CARRIES OUT LIAISON?

Most liaison with GRT communities was carried out alongside other policing duties including conventional community and neighbourhood roles, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Framing of GRT liaison roles within policing organisations



There was a tacit assumption amongst most participants that more time spent upon liaison was positive for GRT communities, with a civilian (Force 22) stating that advantages of a liaison role included

‘...more time to be able to dedicate to the community.’

An extension of this assumption is that those in dedicated liaison roles were more likely to provide what police considered a good service. A full-time civilian GRTLO from Force 11 demonstrated the breadth of activity possible within dedicated roles, citing good practice as

‘...investing time in basic community policing and including GRT sites as part of daily preventative patrols by neighbourhood teams after receiving GRT training. Not just reacting to reported incidents but spending time in the community understanding the concerns of the community and listening to them. This has proved invaluable in enabling members of the community to have the confidence to report and see through incidents against vulnerability and in particular Domestic Abuse. Consistency with engagement has proved extremely beneficial and assisting with very small difficult issues for the community has a major benefit on the all-round relationship with the police.’

Consistent engagement is also seen as positive by the Traveller Movement (2019), who state that ‘from the beginning, the communities were keen to have some form of consistent engagement with the police’. This consistency might be less easily achieved by those who might need to forsake liaison in favour of dynamic policing demands.

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Liaison roles were linked to place rather than people, with functionality centred around behaviours which legislation frames as deviating from sedentary norms. This focus was illustrated by only eight of forty-six respondents making any reference to housed GRT populations despite two-thirds of Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers living in bricks and mortar housing (The Traveller Movement, 2023). A focus upon mobile populations is problematic, as wide variation in pitch provision on sites results in cultural mobility being difficult to practise. The Scottish Government (2018) reported that whilst twenty local authorities provided one or more sites, the remaining twelve had no provision, limiting mobility. Twelve of the local authorities who provided sites reported waiting lists for pitches and/or having turned away households looking for site provision. Sergeant A, Force 23, stated that the problem was 'Housing. This is one of the main reasons why I come into contact with the Traveller community in terms of pro-active policing. There is always a problem with housing in the terms of there is simply not enough permanent sites for them to live on, nor is there enough transition sites for them to attend when they are travelling through the area. This will again lead onto the issue around unlawful encampments and the amount of police time spent on them.'

Lack of accommodation for mobile Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers along with 'deviancy amplification' (Sibley, 1981, p. 141) from media organisations has the potential to create a structural imperative for police to use legislation to move GRT groups on from unauthorised encampments.

There was an inference that the GRTLO function serves to save other officers and staff from awkward or antagonistic interactions. It mirrors a finding from The Traveller Movement's 2019 report, which describes a policing perception that Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers tend to be confrontational. A constable from Force 24 stated 'In the...district response officers and supervisors are reluctant to go onto the GRT sites, preferring to tag/delay response and leave...the GRTLO...to attend once back on duty. Rarely will patrol staff go onto the sites.'

This ghettoization of sites could perhaps be offset by the GRTLO role adopting a helicopter function as described by a Force 11 civilian:

'Local police teams in our force are more active than ever in dealing with the GRT community and take responsibility for problem solving on the ground within the GRT community. This has allowed the GRT liaison/advisor role to oversee the many ongoing local issues and ensure that guidance and direction is applied to all.'

This helicopter role utilised the relationships and cultural knowledge of a specified liaison function, whilst not siloing GRT communities away from the services provided to other populations. It also retains the consistency in engagement framed as important by The Traveller Movement (2019).

ENGAGEMENT OR ENFORCEMENT?

James' (2007) suggestion that GRT experiences of policing are dominated by enforcement was reinforced by 40 percent of GRTLOs initiating or progressing procedures to remove service users from unauthorised encampments; this emphasis risks shifting focus towards enforcement and away from effective liaison. This strategic dissonance was not lost on some GRTLOs. A sergeant from Force 21 was reticent about using legislation, stating

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'We try to promote better community cohesion and include the GRT communities in matters relating to the area they move into when an unauthorised encampment forms. We are not quick to use police powers to remove encampments due to a lack of provision, there are no transit sites with the county.'

The sergeant tacitly recognised that use of legislation did not address a structural lack of site provision and suggested that delaying legislative action was proportionate and constructive. Such a delay would also allow residents to access services, something which the Equal Opportunities Committee (2013) notes that police-led eviction precludes.

There were also instances where engagement and enforcement functioned simultaneously. Sergeant B from Force 23 discussed a high-profile incident wherein members of a GRT community had been convicted of the manslaughter of a public servant. The sergeant

'... liaised with the families of the defendants in the...murder case prior to and during the trial... It minimised any potential issues during the trial and limited issues back on area.'

Officers in this instance appeared to be simultaneously investigating individuals for a serious crime, whilst providing support to defendants' families as they worried about potential repercussions. Although perhaps not replicable, this instance did demonstrate that neither police nor service users saw engagement and enforcement as mutually exclusive. Different and even contradictory policing functions appeared to be accepted when their purpose was transparent.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST

In order to deliver positive change for GRT groups, policing organisations must 'build explicitly on long established and trusting relationships' as described by Lhussier, Carr, and Forster (2015, p. 125).

Trust was referenced seventy-four times throughout the data. It was overwhelmingly framed as something which, although problematic to achieve, was to be sought. A constable from Force 10 discussed the importance of trust in four sections of the questionnaire, stressing that

'[An example of good practice from my policing organisation is] regular attendance at local 'Gypsy and Traveller' forums as a participant. This has increased trust and confidence within the community and has led to a number of recorded hate crimes/incidents that would have previously gone unreported.'

Trust was seen as a prerequisite for effective dialogue. It facilitated communication at organisational and individual levels and allowed for practical support to be provided. It also encouraged increased engagement with the wider criminal justice system.

Several participants saw a bespoke liaison role as facilitating trust between GRT groups and police. The dynamic of a champion is a well-established mechanism by which agencies seek to communicate with less-engaged groups (Equal Opportunities Committee, 2013; Amnesty International, 2012). A Force 26 constable distinguished between specified liaison officers and regular police by emphasising the increased potential to build trust:

'Liaison Officers engage with GRT communities by attending in civilian clothing and in a unmarked police car. Barriers are created when individuals from the GRT see Hi-Viz jackets and police equipment handcuffs etc. By attending in plain clothes but identifying yourself as a police officer, [it] can lead to better engagements...'

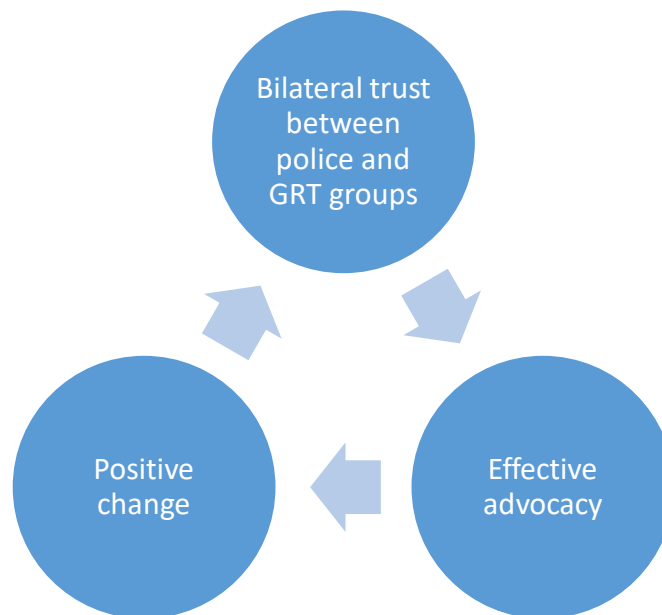
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Overtly signalling a liaison rather than an enforcement mindset through removing traditional policing paraphernalia might help to foster trust. This approach would however restrict liaison to specified officers. Nevertheless, The Traveller Movement (2019) argue for equal rather than special treatment for Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers, stating that this encourages cohesive and consensual relationships. Several participants agreed with this perspective, and in some cases the amalgamation of liaison duties into a regular policing role did not appear to limit the scope of liaison. An inspector from Force 23 described good practice in their area:

‘As a result [of a joint problem-solving approach focused upon public health issues] we saw an increase in support from victims of domestic violence at the site and an increase in positive outcomes for the victims.’

The above liaison was carried out within a traditional community policing remit and adhered to traditional community policing values such as joint problem solving, building trust, and prolonged engagement with service users as described by Fielding (2005). Trust was obtained via delivery of outcomes rather than by restricting liaison to a specified officer or staff member. Figure 2 below demonstrates a cycle of effective service provision as described in Force 23.

Figure 2: Cycle of effective service provision



This model is predicated upon delivery of outcomes rather than exceptionalism, thereby avoiding further ostracising GRT groups via service delivery. A dearth of communication between police and minority ethnic groups as described by Myhill (2012), the nomadic and insular lifestyles subscribed to by some GRT groups as discussed by Tammi and Cadger (2017) and a confused policing function caught between enforcement and engagement have all limited the potential for building trust. The cyclical nature of trust as illustrated above requires a change in the way that officers and staff engage with Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers; such a change might be inhibited by the legislation-focused practice ascribed to by many policing organisations.

Some participants moved away from traditional policing altogether in order to improve service provision and encourage trust. A Force 20 inspector referenced that the Romani Cultural & Arts Company had been ‘instrumental in providing opportunities for our SPOCs to attend GRT awareness events and to share their

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experiences.’ This company is GRT-led and promotes advocacy through the arts (Romani Cultural & Arts Company, 2023). Such an approach to training is not common for policing organisations, who Coxhead (2007) describes as being insular. Meanwhile, a temporary chief inspector from Force 4 referenced an official visit to Poland:

‘I was invited as the first police officer to attend the Gypsy Roma Traveller Holocaust Memorial Event in Poland in 2019. I attended for 5 days with over 500 Travellers, and this built strong links within the community...I stood shoulder to shoulder with the leader and laid a wreath from [Force 4] Constabulary in full police uniform. During the visit I attended workshops with the GRT community and spoke as a police officer which built some fantastic links.’

Albeit outliers in the data, both of these activities transcend traditional policing behaviour or remits, prioritising the embracing of cultures and developing trust by so doing.

IMPLICATIONS/ RESULTS

There was a clear appetite for more effective engagement with and service provision for UK Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller groups. Whilst it is important to recognise that this project was police-centric rather than capturing the voices of GRT communities, it was still possible to draw out considerations for practice.

- **Policing organisations should consider the purpose of engagement.** At present there appears to be a lack of clarity as to what liaison is supposed to achieve. Enforcement of legislation criminalising unauthorised encampments harms service user welfare; given lack of site provision, officers and staff cannot act as champions for GRT communities whilst progressing their removal from encampments. Liaison should also include housed GRT populations.
- **Treat Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers as part of the wider community.** Officers and staff should feel as comfortable engaging with Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers as they are with any other ethnicity. Speaking with service users should not be the sole function of GRTLOs, as this risks further isolating communities. If a SPOC is in place, consideration should be given to this function adopting a helicopter role to utilise relationships and cascade cultural knowledge to officers and staff.
- **Work towards developing a social contract with GRT groups.** At present, the nexus between engagement and enforcement is opaque and differs depending on locality. Officers and staff need to communicate openly with GRT groups as to what liaison is intended to accomplish. Policing organisations should prioritise trust building and examine whether effective liaison can be undertaken alongside action to remove Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers from their places of residence.

CONCLUSION

Although this research and its conclusions were based upon a small sample of those who carry out liaison with UK GRT groups, the purposive nature of the sample meant that it generated valuable insights. This project was not designed to be a standalone piece of research; arguably more crucial in exploring how police might improve services for GRT groups are the voices of Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers themselves. Given the low representation of GRT groups within the police and the historical antipathy between Gypsies, Roma, Travellers, and the police, an 'effective' police service as designed by officers and staff might be antithetical to that envisaged by GRT groups. As such, the second part of my doctoral project will seek to gather the perspectives and narratives of Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers in Scotland. In 2023, I will carry out a series of interviews with service users in Scotland. These interviews will address the engagement/enforcement nexus, the phenomenon of trust, the nature of police training, and potential policing innovations as they relate to GRT communities. This need to contextualise or even repudiate policing perspectives has resulted in my having held back from offering recommendations in the strictest sense in this paper. Instead, my considerations might act as a prompt for policing organisations to examine their own practice in light of what other innovations are occurring across the UK, and to seek the voices of Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers in establishing whether these practices might be beneficial in their constabulary areas.

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