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Energy advice for Traveller Communities in the context of ethnic and spatial premiums: 'paying the price' for other people's choices

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Abstract

Despite indications that Traveller Communities face particular vulnerabilities to fuel poverty, research on Travellers' experiences of energy provision, consumption and advice is scant. We report on a qualitative case study evaluation of face-to-face energy advice for Traveller Communities in the North of England. The service was instrumental in building trust, facilitating access to entitlements, and increasing control over energy bills. However, the impact of the service was limited by structural and spatial constraints surrounding energy provision on the Traveller site that resulted in disproportionate fuel costs for residents.

Keywords

Traveller Communities; energy advice; fuel poverty; energy justice; ethnicity

Word Count: 8064

Introduction

Studies from the UK and Ireland highlight that Traveller Communities experience stark inequalities in health, including lower life expectancy (Abdalla et al 2010), increased likelihood of living with a long-term health condition (Parry et al 2007), and fewer years living in good health than the wider population (Abdalla et al 2013). These health outcomes are underpinned by inequalities across the range of wider health determinants (Kelleher et al 2012), and the experience of 'spatialised poverty' (Cemlyn and Clark 2005). The term 'Traveller Community' is used to encompass a number of culturally distinct groups, including English or Welsh Romany Gypsies, Scottish Gypsy/Travellers, Irish Travellers, Roma from Eastern and Central Europe, Showmen and Bargee Communities. Travellers face pervasive discrimination (Pew Research centre 2014) and considerable challenges in finding appropriate accommodation (Cullen et al 2008, Greenfields and Brindley 2016, Greenfields and Smith 2010, Lane et al 2014).

Access to a safe, suitable and secure home has long been recognised as an important social determinant of health (Barnes et al 2013, Gibson et al 2011, Marmot 2010). Fuel poverty is one mechanism through which housing impacts on health, covering an inability to afford any home energy service (including heating, lighting, hot water, cooking and the use of appliances)(Boardman 1991, Thomson 2013). Fuel poverty is defined as fuel costs exceeding national average, and household income falling below the official poverty line if these costs were met (Department of Energy and Climate Change 2013). A review of the evidence on the health impact of fuel poverty suggests that cold homes negatively affect respiratory and cardiovascular health, worsen long-term health conditions such as arthritis and increase the probability of falls (Geddes et al 2011). Fuel poverty is connected with the ability to eat well (Lambie-Mumford and Snell 2015, Snell et al 2018) and negatively impacts on mental health (Liddell and Morris 2010). Estimates of the number of excess winter deaths caused by cold homes vary widely (Braubach et al 2011). However, Hills (2012) conservatively suggests that around 10% of excess winter deaths are directly attributable to fuel poverty.

There are indications that Traveller Community members are at greater risk of fuel poverty. A survey in a London Borough found that all Traveller households (the majority of whom were living on a Traveller site) spent more than 10% of their income on heating and could therefore be considered to be in fuel poverty (as defined at the time) (Hillingdon London Borough 2005). Fuel poverty is the result of three interacting factors: household income, the cost of energy, and the energy efficiency of the home (Department of Energy and Climate Change 2013). Available literature suggests that Travellers experience distinct challenges in relation to all of these risk factors. High rates of unemployment and economic inactivity (Office for National Statistics 2014), and the greater number of Traveller pupils eligible for free school meals (The Traveller Movement 2014), suggest that members are likely to live on lower incomes than those in the general population, with this explained by a number of structural inequalities (Ryder and Cemlyn 2016). Traveller Communities also face heating costs that are higher than average. A health needs assessment in Leeds estimated that on average, Gypsies and Travellers were paying 42% more for energy than settled consumers (Thompson 2013). A number of reasons have been identified for these higher fuel bills. Restrictions over the heating systems and delivery methods permitted on Traveller sites (Leech 2015) mean that community members are often reliant on more expensive forms of fuel provision, such as Calor Gas, to heat caravans (Hillingdon London Borough 2005, Leech 2015, Wemyss 2015). Indeed, in the most recent Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment in the study area (Renaissance Research 2017), three respondents reported that they were considering moving into housing due to the comparably higher costs of living on sites (including for services such as water and electricity). Low literacy levels, isolation from support services, and possible mistrust in authorities may pose further barriers to obtaining the best energy prices (Leech 2015). Deals which rely on online access, and require monthly payments, are suggested as not always possible or preferable for Traveller Communities (Leech 2015). Finally, many caravans are not energy efficient, and Travellers often need to heat two spaces (a caravan and what is referred to as a 'shed' containing a kitchen, bathroom, lobby and living area) (Hillingdon London Borough 2005, Leech 2015, Wemyss 2015).

There is convincing evidence that affordable warmth and energy efficiency interventions can result in health benefits, particularly when targeted at vulnerable individuals, such as those experiencing health issues (Balfour and Allen 2014, Eadson and Leather 2017, Gibson et al 2011). Policy measures have been put in place over a number of years to tackle fuel poverty. This includes assistance to increase the energy efficiency of homes (Department of Energy & Climate Change 2012), support with fuel payments for those on low incomes (Department for Business Energy & Industrial Strategy 2011) and obligations on energy providers to implement measures that improve the ability of vulnerable households to heat their homes (Energy Company Obligation (2013). Indeed, the Fuel Poverty England Regulations (Department of Energy and Climate Change 2014) placed a legal duty on the Government to raise the energy efficiency rating of as many fuel poor households as possible to Band C by 2030. The associated Fuel poverty strategy for England (Department of Energy and Climate Change 2015) sets out a particular need to address risks of fuel poverty experienced by the most vulnerable sections of society, including older people, young people and those with long term health conditions or disabilities. However, many of the generic energy advice and affordable warmth schemes noted above do not apply to the specific circumstances of Traveller Communities (Hillingdon London Borough 2005). Evidence from Scotland suggests that Energy Performance Certificates are often not utilised to judge the energy efficiency of amenity blocks on Traveller sites since there is no requirement to assess buildings under 50 square metres (The Scottish Government 2018). Support schemes to enhance energy performance (such as fitting cavity insulation) for instance are not necessarily applicable to caravans or utility blocks (Leech 2015) and local authority housing standards often do not encompass Gypsy and Traveller sites (Butcher 2014). These absences are notwithstanding the commitment to enabling fair access to housing and utilities within the EU Framework for Roma Integration (1), and previous government recommendations (withdrawn in 2015) to ensure the energy efficiency of homes when designing Traveller sites (Department for Communities and Local Government 2008). This scenario is underpinned by the disjuncture which

has been identified between the EU framework for Roma Integration and the driving principles of localism and monoculturalism advanced in UK policy (Ryder and Cemlyn 2016).

Despite recognition of the potential vulnerabilities of Traveller Communities to fuel poverty, research in this area is scarce (Butcher 2014, Wemyss 2015), and only one report on energy advice for Traveller Communities could be located (Hillingdon London Borough 2005). Indeed, Richardson and Codona (2016: recently called for more widespread support for Traveller Communities to broker better deals with energy companies.

This paper focuses on one case study that formed part of a larger qualitative evaluation of an energy advice service in the North of England, and is reported on elsewhere (Author and Author 2017). The case study focuses on experiences of the service among Traveller Community members, who were living on a permanent local authority site. The energy advice service was part of a UK charity, 'Comic Relief' funded, national programme focusing on supporting vulnerable people to cope with the challenges of financial austerity. Working with skilled energy advisors, the service offered at-home financial and energy consumption assessment, support and guidance.

The case study adds to current understanding of Traveller Community experiences of energy provision and consumption, including challenges faced and the role of face-to-face energy advice in addressing these. In doing so, it responds to recent calls in the field of energy justice for increased understanding of 'on-the-ground perspectives from vulnerable households' and ways to promote their inclusion in energy schemes (Gillard et al 2017: pp 59). Following on from the recent themed edition in this journal (Matache 2018) examining reasons for the persistence of poverty and injustice faced by Roma, Gypsy and Traveller communities from macro political, economic, or cultural perspectives, this paper adds a local and applied perspective on contributors to fuel poverty specifically among these groups, and how this can be addressed. It also contributes to understanding the spatial (as opposed to only socio-economic) dimensions of fuel poverty (Bouzarovski and

Simcock 2017), giving insight into the connections between Traveller Community members' place of living, their experiences of energy provision and the impact of energy advice in these circumstances.

Methods

Research design

A case study approach was taken to gain an in-depth understanding of energy advice provision for Traveller Communities, and the contextual influences surrounding support for these groups (Crowe et al 2011, Yin 1984). Community members involved in this study self-identified as 'English Travellers'. Given the exploratory stage of research in this area, qualitative methods were used to access people's perceptions towards energy providers, and their experiences of energy provision and advice. Ethical approval for the study was received from Northumbria University Research Ethics Committee.

Sampling, recruitment and data collection

One energy advisor who provided advice to Traveller Communities, and three Traveller Community members who received advice (from one Traveller site in the region) took part in semi-structured individual interviews about their experiences. Traveller Communities are over-researched groups, who have often seen very limited improvements to their lives as a result of this engagement (Brown and Scullion 2010). This, combined with fear of discrimination when disclosing one's ethnicity, means that Traveller Community members may, understandably, be cautious about participating in research (Brown and Scullion 2010). For this reason, potential participants were identified and initially invited to take part by the energy advisor, who was known and trusted. Following this, participants were contacted by the researcher to arrange a suitable time and date for the interview. All three Traveller Community members initially identified were happy to take part in the study. Given the potential for illiteracy, and as advised by the energy advisor, study information and consent forms were explained verbally to participants, in addition to the provision of written copies.

Interviews with Traveller Community members were held in participant's homes and the energy advisor was interviewed at their place of work.

Data analysis

All participants gave their permission for the audio recording of interviews, which were then transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of data was undertaken, using NVivo data management software. Given the large degree of shared perspectives, findings from interviews with the energy advisor and Traveller Community members are presented under common headings. Following a brief introduction to the context of the particular case study, findings are presented for four themes that emerged through the data: 1) interaction with and perceptions of energy companies; 2) the energy advisor as a trusted expert; 3) the perceived impact of the energy advice service; 4) forced choices over energy provision. This is followed by a concluding discussion of the implications of project findings.

Results

Context to the particular case study

A need for energy advice among residents of the particular Traveller site studied was identified due to a longstanding confusion with billing caused by electricity meters being registered to the incorrect property numbers during site refurbishment. Although community members raised this as an issue, and an engineer from the company responsible for energy provision at the time did visit the site to explore the problem, the situation remained unresolved for around 1.5 years. Due to the problems with billing, the energy company advised residents not to make payments until a solution could be found. However, despite this advice, community members received late payment letters threatening action and were approached by bailiffs, giving rise to considerable stress. Until the issues with billing were resolved, Traveller Community members were unable to make any changes to their electricity

provision, such as switching to a lower tariff or applying for Warm Homes discounts, contributing to the inflation of energy bills.

Interaction with and perceptions of energy companies

Traveller Community members had tried to engage with energy companies prior to receiving advice in order to sort out the confusion with billing, but described great difficulty in doing so. Long call holding times, being transferred to multiple agents and the lack of a resolution despite frequent contact led Traveller Community members to describe communication with energy companies as 'like hitting a brick wall':

You spoke to somebody different every time you rang. You were on the phone waiting for anything up to an hour to speak to somebody. You were passed from pillar to post... Somebody made an appointment to come out to see me once and nobody even turned up (Traveller Community member 2)

A relationship of mutual distrust between Traveller Community members and energy companies appeared to be operating. Communication difficulties were exacerbated by energy company accusations of dishonesty when Traveller Communities had called companies to give meter readings but had mistaken the display box on their individual heat pumps for their electricity meter:

when they've told take a photograph of your meter they've took a photograph of the display and on a few occasions they've said to me "I've tried to ring it in and they've blatantly told me over the phone I'm a liar" (Energy Advisor)

Likewise, Traveller Community members saw energy companies as self-serving, and their customer service staff were described as lacking empathy or understanding for people's personal circumstances:

They don't care about no-one, just themselves, the electricity people. And they wouldn't like it to happen to them, would they? (Traveller Community member 1)

Given the discrimination Traveller Communities are known to experience, the research explored the extent to which this lens was used to explain expressions of distrust and the treatment of Traveller Communities by energy companies. Travellers' perceptions of energy companies were judged by the

energy advisor as reflecting attitudes found in society more generally, including those she held herself:

I: what if any sort [of] views did Traveller Communities express about energy companies generally?

Energy advisor: well they're just rip off merchants. Whether I believe them or not, I think I probably do after some of the things I've seen. They never make, they never make mistakes that aren't in their favour...that's not just them [Traveller Communities], yeah that is everybody. Nobody's, even the newspapers and the TV don't have any trust in them do they (Energy Advisor)

The energy advisor expressed uncertainty around whether prejudice underpinned the responses of energy providers to Traveller Community members, since poor treatment by energy companies was observed in many other sections of the population:

It's quite a hard one to say because I've seen, I've seen average people on, you know in a normal house get get treat horrendously (Energy Advisor)

One Traveller Community member seemed to hint at the potential role of discrimination, describing how addresses were changed to avoid specifying that residents' live on a Traveller site, in order to counter the risk of discrimination more generally:

I: Did you ever think they were treating you differently because you were on a Traveller site, or do you think they do that with everyone?

P: Well we all saw that; they give a different name, you know? They took 'caravan site' off this now. I don't know if it's on your official letter, but it's not on anything else. And it used to be 'such and such' caravan site. Gypsy caravan site... And when you went to the shops, you were like... You now? And it's chalk an cheese in every walk of like. You get a bad name... But everybody on here is like a family. Everybody looks after each other (Traveller Community Member 1)

Overall, however, participants tended not to present their interaction with energy companies as affected by their ethnicity. Having discussed the tensions Traveller Community members experienced in engaging with energy companies directly, the following theme considers the role of the energy advisor in helping navigate energy provision.

The energy advisor as a trusted expert

In contrast to energy companies, the energy advisor was well trusted by community members. She did not have prior connections with the Traveller Community but was approached by the council to help resolve the issues with billing on site, and was introduced to residents by the site manager, who is herself a Traveller Community member. The energy advisor herself suggested that her position as someone who was neither from an energy company nor the local authority had been important in developing relationships with community members. One Traveller Community participant described the energy advisor as someone who is 'on your side' and 'fighting for you'. As Traveller Community members developed trust in the energy advisor and became more comfortable with energy bills, they also sought advice on and became more at ease with water rates on the site, resulting in an increase in these payments:

they're getting the swing of it and I think they're probably more they're more trusting...and they'll say to me "how much do you pay for your water rates cause I think I'm paying too much" even though I don't do anything with water. And I'll tell them, you know and they'll say "um oh well maybes it's not too bad then" (Energy Advisor)

While some individuals on the Traveller site chose not to take up advice initially (or at all), the energy advisor described how successful stories from those who received advice spread by word of mouth, helping to build trust and resulting in others approaching for support:

since I've been sorting it out I've had people come round saying erm "I think I might let you have a look at me bills, can you come round" because it's that trust thing. They've seen other people doing alright with it so (Energy Advisor)

One participant similarly suggested that she was initially sceptical of the energy advisor's ability to resolve the situation after a number of people had previously tried and failed to do so:

All I know was that the warden phoned and said "would you like me to send somebody down" and that's when I say, I was optimistic [pessimistic], 'cos I thought; oh yeah, somebody else that doesn't know what they're doing (Traveller Community member 2)

However, this participant went on to describe how the energy advisor's ability to make quick progress towards finding a solution raised her confidence and improved her outlook:

By the second visit, she'd already made headway... so that lifted me a little bit, to be honest... She took everything away and she came back and she was saying "this is wrong;

that's not right" and she said "I've been on the phone; I've sorted this out..." It was just... I could see she'd already made a real step forward (Traveller Community member 2)

The close-knit network of Traveller Community members on the site also brought challenges. The energy advisor relayed a particular concern about managing expectations regarding outcomes of grant applications to cover the cost of energy debt, and the risk of harming relationships where grants were successful for some and not others:

I was a bit wary on the Traveller sites because they all know each other... and I thought that puts more pressure ...every time one came back to say it's been paid off which was it was like a dual experience cause I thought fantastic great that's another one safe but at the same time I thought that that puts me up my expectation or their expectations of me that further up then... I kept thinking I hope one of these doesn't come back and say "we're not paying that one"...I didn't want anybody to think that they'd had a lesser erm a lesser grant form a lesser experience than anybody else (Energy Advisor)

This concern led to significant pressure experienced by the advisor with respect to writing grants and achieving positive outcomes for clients. The advisor therefore stressed the necessity for honesty at the outset of the process about the possibility that a grant would not be successful, as well as the importance of confidentiality.

Participants valued the time that the energy advisor took to support them, suggesting that she had gone 'above and beyond' to help. Some participants also commented on the energy advisor's friendly approach, describing her as a 'likeable' and a 'lovely person' for instance. The energy advisor herself also acknowledged the importance of this informal and approachable style:

I think they trust me, you know even if I call it a chat "we're just gonna chat about your bill" (laughs) so it's like a friendly, it's not like somebody coming down suited and booted and looking like they're authority you know (Energy Advisor)

In addition to, and connected with the advisor's trusted position, her specialist expertise was integral to the support offered and something that was commented on positively by all Traveller Community members interviewed. While local authority employees had tried previously to resolve the problems with energy provision on the site, a more detailed understanding of energy provision was key in achieving a resolution. The advisor's in-depth knowledge meant not only that she could

understand the complexities of energy supply and communicate effectively with companies, but also that she was less likely than they were to be misled:

I'm not an educated person; I don't know what a kilowatt is compared to a megawatt. I really don't... It's like you've got to have a degree in rocket science to understand them, but she knew exactly what she was doing (Traveller Community member 2)

I think the energy company understands that they're not dealing with the average Joe; that she's not going to give up. She's going to get something from this. She's not going to leave it lie and not just take whatever they say on board (Traveller Community member 3)

Participants commented not only on the advisor's knowledge of energy provision, but also on her effective navigation of the system:

where it took me hours to get through to actually speak to somebody, she could just get through within like a matter of minutes to speak to someone (Traveller Community member 2)

The need for advice about gas and electricity was not unique to Traveller Community members. The energy advisor described helping people with varied circumstances, and levels of knowledge about energy were described as generally low across society as a whole:

I go to see everybody, I've been to see people who are you know very wealthy, I've seen people with absolutely nothing and everybody in between and everybody deserves a chat about their gas and electric because let's face it, it's not done at school, and we all need to know what we're doing, don't we really? (Energy Advisor)

However, for some Traveller Community members, issues around literacy posed a particular challenge to accessing the best energy deals:

there is a lot of people, not so much on this site, but other sites that can't maybe read and write so well and don't understand, like, the rights that they've got to change their supplier. (Traveller Community member 3)

That the trusted and expert position of the energy advisor forms a key aspect of support raises important issues around dependency on services and the importance of sustainability. Without the support provided, community members suggested that they would have struggled to resolve the issues of incorrect billing and access entitlements:

I'll tell you the truth, she was a godsend for everybody on here. I don't think we could have done without her (Traveller Community member 1)

Indeed, the energy advisor interviewed appeared uncertain about whether the support had better equipped community members to engage with energy providers independently, describing providing ongoing support to community members:

yeah I can imagine they're probably more, in a better position and they know they can give me a ring up and ask me anything they want you know if they're querying anything that [energy company] have said or whoever (Energy Advisor)

Furthermore, one Traveller Community participant described how, were the service to be delivered by someone new, time would be required to gain the trust of the community:

Well, her face is familiar now on the site, but erm, people's come to trust her...You know, they don't mind giving her their details and what have you. Maybe a different person wouldn't... It would take them a lot longer. A lot lot longer. Somebody starting out in the job, completely different (Traveller Community member 3)

Given the importance of the energy advisor in facilitating access to entitlements and the trust invested in this individual over time, this Traveller Community member therefore expressed concern that the service was funded on a short-term basis:

I don't know if her service will get up and running again, but I sincerely hope it does. Really. Because it'll be well missed. It really is; it's a service that we need (Traveller Community member 3)

The perceived impact of the energy advice service
Traveller Community members described experiencing considerable stress and anxiety as a result of the receipt of large bills, payment reminders and accumulating debt to energy companies prior to advice and during the period of confusion over billing:

and you know when you think you're at the end of your tether and I literally couldn't sleep for the thought of these bills (Traveller Community member 2)

Oh, it was pulling everybody down (Traveller Community member 1)

Although advised not to make payments by the energy company, a fear of debt and desire to stay in credit meant that Traveller Community members tried, but often struggled to keep up with escalating bills:

She says “you shouldn’t be paying that much” but I was paying it because I was frightened (Traveller Community member 1)

I like my bills paid; I thought: I’ve got to go and pay this. It’ll be a mistake but it’ll get sorted out. But I didn’t want red reminders coming in. So I went and paid it, but they just kept on coming. £300, £400 for every quarter. Some were £600 (Traveller Community member 2)

The energy advisor described the effect of debt as particularly felt among those who had previously been living on roadside and who were not used to receiving monthly bills:

the ones that have been on the caravans, never had a bill and then all of a sudden they found themselves three, four thousand pound in debt, you know, you can imagine, and when you’re on seventy three pound a week, you can imagine that’s just never gonna get paid is it (Energy Advisor)

After working to ensure that community members received the correct bills for their property and energy use, the advisor helped Traveller Community members to reduce their expenditure on energy through support to switch to cheaper energy tariffs. In addition, where applicable, participants received help to apply for their entitlement to Warm Homes discount, and the advisor worked towards reductions in outstanding debt:

[name] came out and she sorted mine out and changed me from... [energy company], I think it was... To [energy company]. It’s not saving a lot, but it’s a saving (Traveller Community member 3)

I’ve never been in debt. Never. And it was hanging on me like a black cloud and she said “look, the stress that you’ve caused...” And she got the outstanding amount quashed, so I could start from new (Traveller Community member 2)

One community member also described the impact of advice on knowledge of how to make savings by cutting down on electricity use:

So she went through that. Like all the ways of saving money on electricity... And I just hope that they’ve took it on board. I certainly have...Everything is turned off when I go out (Traveller Community member 3)

Where needed, support was provided to community members with accessing budget cards, setting up payment plans and dealing with bills for their ongoing energy use:

I've gone through with them how much they're using, how much they can cut back by erm and they've set up payment plans. We've asked for budget cards (Energy Advisor)

One Traveller Community participant described how the support provided had also helped people on site to better prepare for winter by increasing awareness of what they are likely to be spending on energy. Again, support around billing was noted by the energy advisor as particularly relevant to community members who had previously been living on roadside:

quite a few of them on the sites have come from erm caravans just by the side of the road so they've had no bills whatsoever to look at, so it's just explaining to them you know what needs to be done basically (Energy Advisor)

Help to regulate energy payments enabled participants to get 'back to normal' and feel more in control of their energy bills:

Like I'm on a steady thing now and I feel a bit better (Traveller Community member 1)

It cleared the board; I was back to normal and I could start paying my bills and I knew where I was at (Traveller Community member 2)

As a result, participants described a reduction in anxiety, and suggested that the support had given them 'peace of mind':

But I'm happy [name] got me all sorted, so I'm not worrying now like I would have been worrying. Well, we've not reached the winter yet, like, but... (Traveller Community member 1)

Some community members also described the tangible differences to their lives resulting from the service. For one participant who was living with a long-term condition, fear of using electricity posed additional challenges to self-care and mobility in her home environment. Following advice, she felt better able to use electricity as needed to support her health needs:

But when it's cold, it's cold in these buildings, you know what I mean? And I was really being careful and [name] says to me: "stop being so careful" she says "they couldn't switch your electricity off; not in the state you are"...But I use the outside lights and everything, all down to [name] and I mean, it's dark out here, you know?... And especially when you've got mobility problems as well (Traveller Community member 1)

Another described how the alleviation of stress and frustration caused by debt had enabled her to enjoy Christmas:

I think it was nearly £2000 altogether, what I'd racked up, but then she got the £300 knocked off and she said "look, I'll help you; we'll go for this and see if we can get..." 'Cos she said "what you've been through, nobody helping..." the frustration was... I can't make you understand...Erm, and yeah, she did... Well I had a good Christmas, anyway (Traveller Community member 2)

Forced choices over energy provision

Despite the positive outcomes that were achieved for clients, the ability to ensure financial savings and affordability of energy was limited by some specific details in accommodation provision for Traveller Communities. For instance, as there is no mains gas supply on the site, Traveller Community members relied on electric heating, which tends to be more costly. In addition, Air Source heat pumps, which have been installed for all pitches on the Traveller site, were described as an expensive heating system. LPG gas is used to heat caravans, and electric heating is only used for heating 'sheds'. Yet, Traveller Community members described receiving bills that were disproportionately high considering the small spaces heated, and when compared with those paid for 'conventional' housing:

it's an expensive heating system...because they live in the caravans so all they were getting, wha- they they call them sheds, were just living in a shed, using the bathroom, making dinner and were pay- getting charged ridiculous amounts of money to heat this when they're already paying for their heating, Calor gas in the caravans. So they ended up paying more than somebody in a 5 bedroomed detached house (Energy Advisor)

Like I say, he [energy company advisor] brought this little digital clock thing to monitor what electricity was used... he had to hold his hands up and say "I'm baffled. I can't justify the amount of electric that's being used for this amount of floor space". (Traveller Community member 2)

The decisions over heating systems on site were presented as driven by environmental concerns. However, Traveller Community members described a lack of choice with regard to energy and heating systems, and expressed frustration that they themselves pay the cost for the choices of others:

The radiator would have done. Under floor heating. In a shed? Come on (Traveller Community member 1)

But as I say, it's still extortionate for what it is. Nobody can believe it. We've spoke to obviously the council. The things have been built and I don't think they knew really how to go about it. But it's the residents that's paying the price. Really, it is (Traveller Community member 3)

This situation was exacerbated by feelings that misinformation had been given about the heating systems when first moving on to the site:

when we moved here, these new boilers were supposed to be the new state of the art economical... And like I say, it was even said: oh, your bills will be cheaper than it was in the house... Did I get a shock? (Traveller Community member 2)

Not only were energy provision and delivery systems circumscribed by Traveller Community members' place of living, but variation in the prices of standard versus online tariffs also meant that Traveller Community members often could not access the cheapest deals.

Study limitations

Given the small-scale nature of the case study, it was only possible to undertake interviews with a small number of participants from one Traveller site in the region. As participants were selected and approached by the energy advisor rather than the research team, and were therefore presumably satisfied with the service received, they may not represent the range of views toward the service. However, participants often suggested that their own experiences mirrored those of others on the study site and in the wider area. It was also not possible to speak to Travellers who did not avail of the energy advice offered. All Travellers interviewed were living on an authorised site and as such, their experiences may not represent those of the many Traveller Community members who are housed, or those living on the roadside. Finally, as data was not collected on the cost of energy relative to income, the extent to which Traveller Community participants would be judged as experiencing fuel poverty, and how far the service reduced this gap is unclear. As is common in cases where objective measures are not available, this study used subjective markers to identify fuel poverty among participants (Healy and Clinch 2002). Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the

project alleviated many such subjective indicators of fuel poverty, including worry about and difficulty paying energy bills. Notwithstanding recognised limitations, the case study provides a useful addition to current knowledge in providing a rich description of experiences of an energy advice service among a group who are often overlooked in mainstream energy advice and research. Further research is needed to explore the experiences of energy provision and advice among a larger population of Traveller Communities, and the differential experiences of Traveller Communities living on roadside and in housing.

Discussion and conclusions

Recognising the differential needs of groups is identified as important in creating equity in systems of providing and delivering energy (Gillard et al 2017, Jenkins et al 2016). This article contributes increased understanding of the specific challenges faced by Traveller Communities, one minority group who have received relatively little attention in this field, as well as providing insight into how energy advice can best be provided to these groups.

Energy advice was well received by Traveller Communities and facilitated communication with energy companies. Traveller Community members described important outcomes from the service, which enabled access to support entitlements, helped achieve energy savings, and increased control over energy bills. Ultimately, this reduced worry about energy use and resulted in some reported improvements in quality of life. However, the research also found that structural and spatial conditions in Traveller Community members' lives placed limits on the impact of energy advice. In particular, energy systems on the Traveller site (the use of mains electricity rather than gas, Air Source heat pumps, underfloor heating and Calor Gas for caravans), were identified as not cost-effective, resulting in Traveller Community members paying disproportionately high prices to heat small spaces.

Some structural conditions are not necessarily specific to Traveller Communities. For example, inequality in the customer 'deals' available online versus offline and for monthly billing versus pre-paid meters, apply across the population, and issues around the use of Air Source pumps have been identified more widely in the media (BBC 2012). However, others seem unique to Traveller Communities, including restrictions over the provision of gas on the Traveller site, and the need to heat two spaces. As such, it is suggested that a combined ethnic and spatial premium is operating for Traveller Communities concerning energy. This echoes comments that energy injustices within households can be the product of wider system level inequalities (Jenkins et al 2016). Just as caution has been called for in assuming homogeneity among people who are disabled in regard to vulnerability to fuel poverty (Snell C et al 2015), it is important to acknowledge that there is likely to be within group diversity with respect to Traveller Community members' experiences. Avoiding reinforcing such stereotypes is particularly important given the stigma that is attached to the difficulty heating one's home (Hards 2013).

Traveller Community members' distrust of energy companies, and to an extent, that of the energy advisor herself, reflects broader cultural narratives available in society (Authors In Press). Despite the widespread discrimination faced by Gypsy and Traveller Communities (Pew Research centre 2014), negative experiences with energy companies tended not to be presented through this lens by Traveller Community members and the energy advisor involved in the study.

Unlike the example of the HOPE project (Hillingdon London Borough 2005), the service studied did not appoint a worker who was previously known to Traveller Community members. While this is often considered important, the outcomes of this evaluation suggest that it may not be essential to employ an energy advisor who specialises in working specifically with Traveller Community members. Indeed, the support and advice provided to Traveller Community members mirrored that provided to other groups. The approach of working holistically, and treating each case individually meant the service was equally applicable to Traveller Communities. The energy advisor's personable

approach, her energy expertise, and her quick progress towards resolving the difficulties with electricity on site meant that she was able to develop trust despite not having prior experience of working with the community. This reinforces evidence on the value of face-to-face advice services, both in developing trust with clients but also using this interpersonal relationship to provide access to wider benefits held within complex systems (Author et al 2017). In addition, the energy advisor's position as someone who was neither from an energy company or the local authority meant that she was viewed as acting in the interests of community members, with this also contributing to the building of trust.

While in this instance, it did not prove necessary for the energy advisor to have a background in working with Travellers, trust on the site was built gradually, with good experiences of the service spreading by word of mouth and resulting in further uptake. These findings align with previous research on the importance of trust and the requirement for sustained engagement in order to build relationships with community members (Lhussier et al 2016, McFadden et al 2016). Should there be a staff change, this would entail an increase in time required to re-build trust. In a context of short term funding and delivery systems, reliance on one trusted individual poses a risk to the sustainability of support around energy for Traveller Communities. Traveller Community members themselves expressed concern that the programme would not be funded in future. Without the service, it was noted that many community members would be unable to apply for their entitlements to Warm Homes discount, or switch energy tariff in order to reduce energy expenditure. This highlights the importance of project continuity and where possible, capacity building among community members in relation to managing energy and engaging with companies.

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Footnotes

(1) The term Roma is here used as an umbrella term inclusive of Gypsies and Travellers

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