

# Learning Under Lockdown

*The experiences of Gypsy, Roma and Travellers in Sussex*

Christopher Derbyshire, Emily Danvers, Tamsin Hinton-Smith, Jennie Cole and Tommy Buck

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## Summary of Findings

Our project and research into the experiences of learning under lockdown with GRT young people and their families in Sussex showed how:

- **The experience of lockdown, in different ways, gave GRT young people and their families a chance to connect or re-connect with their GRT culture. Our specific project gave a positive opportunity to make such connections valuable and valued.**
- **GRT young people have complex lives and identities and through our project showed a sophisticated understanding of and engagement with the social, political and everyday impacts of Covid-19.**
- **GRT learners in Sussex are experiencing digital exclusion. None of the families we worked with had adequate digital resources to do the home learning set by the school.**
- **The success of learning under lockdown relied on the assumption of a ‘standard’ learner without support needs. Those who did not fit this model, such as many of our GRT learners, felt left behind.**

We continue to seek opportunity to create interventions that give voice, agency, and greater inclusion to this community of learners.



**Figure 1: *Clay Horse* - Creative Submission**

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Sussex Learning Network (SLN) Uni Connect for the opportunity to continue to engage with young learners from the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) communities in Sussex.

We dedicate this report and project to the young learners and their families from the GRT community who brought life and vibrancy to this project. You are the reason why we do this and why just this is not enough.

## Rationale and Aims

The closure of schools as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic led to a sudden and unprecedented shift to online and home learning. This presented numerous challenges practically and pedagogically for schools, teachers, learners and their families. Initial research suggested that the poorest and/or most disadvantaged pupils are likely to suffer these effects of 'learning under lockdown' more intensely (Sutton Trust, 2020). This includes having a lack or limited access to digital devices and reliable internet connections and having quiet and safe spaces to do schoolwork. Just over a third (34%) of parents with children aged 5-16 reported their child does not have access to their own computer, laptop or tablet that they can use to access the internet on at home own computer, laptop or tablet (Cullinane & R. Montacute, 2018). In addition, the expectation that parents act as facilitators to their children's learning assumes high levels of digital, written and numeric literacy and presumes parents have the time to do so, while managing complex demands of work, health, family and other responsibilities.

In previous research funded by SLN on 'Supporting Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Educational Transitions' we found that GRT pupils continue to experience challenges in their educational progression in East Sussex (Danvers, Hinton-Smith, Derbyshire and Lewis, 2019). This parallels national data which sees GRT pupils have the lowest levels of educational achievement of any ethnic group and are less likely to thrive in childhood (Bhopal, 2019). Some of the main contributing issues cited for this in schooling include experiences of racism and bullying, a lack of understanding of GRT culture by teachers and a failure to connect with and understand practices of home education (Bhopal and Myers, 2016; D'Arcy, 2014). A key recommendation from our project was the need for personalised and targeted support to understand both the challenges faced and how we can reimagine education more inclusively. Our recommendation has been further inspired by an open letter from the Traveller Movement (2020) to the UK Government which reiterates sector wide concerns that GRT pupils will be further marginalised in their education due to digital exclusion and low-grade predictions.

Given the evidence described above, this project 'Learning under Lockdown' sought to consider how young people in Sussex are experiencing the lockdown following the Covid-19 outbreak in Spring 2020. In particular, explore their engagement with schooling alongside other forms of learning. The focus of GRT pupils, allowed us to understand how this group, many of whom already feel marginalised from formal education, experienced learning under lockdown, including any barriers to the 'personalised and targeted support' we recommended in our previous research. A key motivating question for us was - *if GRT pupils*

*already experienced school as ‘outsiders’, what happens to them and their learning when they are further isolated during lockdown?*

## The Learning under Lockdown Project

### Our team and the Sussex GRT Collaborative

This project was managed by Chris Derbyshire (University of Sussex) and is a collaboration between Dr Emily Danvers and Dr Tamsin Hinton-Smith (University of Sussex), Jennie Cole (Hailsham Community College HCC) and Tommy Buck (Friends, Families and Travellers FFT).

This project was made viable partly due to the fact that it was structured by members of an existing informal collaborative of stakeholders who for the last 30 months have sought to give greater visibility, representation, voice, and opportunity to young learners from the GRT community in areas of Sussex. The *Sussex GRT Collaborative* includes representation from FFT (an advocacy charity for this community), from both academic and widening participation aspects of University of Sussex, from the Local Authority, from representation from the community, and from schools supporting the same at both Primary, and Secondary level.

The *Sussex GRT Collaborative* emerged against the concerns generated by various documented statistics evidencing the difficult passage young learners from a GRT background experience in their educational growth. This collaborative has:

- developed an informal but regular forum exploring our understanding of these learners
- provided support, opportunity, and intervention exploring their futures
- created a space for educational issues related to this group of learners to be considered in a proactive, positive light
- prompted additional initiatives that has focused on student voice, family inclusion, positive inclusion

While the ‘Learning under Lockdown’ project has a specific set of criteria and aims, we see it as a continuation of our ongoing work to build connections with the Sussex GRT community, work on collaborative projects and fund meaningful educational activities for young people.

### Learning under Lockdown Project aims

The purpose of this project was:

1. To provide meaningful, resourced, creative engagement to young learners from the GRT community
2. To explore the experience of ‘lockdown’ in a disadvantaged community
3. To promote activity that provides a positive link with education, progression, and role models
4. To contribute to a wider body of research

5. To support the profile of the existing local school based GRT network and its stakeholder group
6. To contribute to the sustainability of engagement with this community
7. To expand the network of contributors, scope of its work, and disseminate/share good practice

We planned to meet these above aims via:

- An 'experiences' of lockdown creative competition for GRT pupils and their parents from HCC.
- Collaboration with FFT and the GRT community on how schools, colleges and universities can together support GRT families during periods of lockdown 'learning'.

### What we did

The project was managed by Chris Derbyshire, with academic steering and research input provided by Emily Danvers and Tamsin Hinton-Smith, all from the University of Sussex.

The project's target group was young learners at a secondary school in East Sussex – HCC. This school has a relatively large GRT intake in the region and has previously demonstrated a willingness to engage with emerging issues and support GRT learners. The GRT work led by Careers Leader Jennie Cole.

The project was facilitated via FFT, a Sussex based national charity which provides advice and consultancy and contributes to research and policy making with the aim of seeking an end to racism and discrimination against Gypsies, Travellers and Roma and to protect the right to pursue a nomadic way of life. Tommy Buck, a policy and outreach worker for FFT, is our key contact in FFT and his role is to support the community access mainstream services whilst trying to decrease inequalities seen in the community in comparison to other groups in society. We felt it was important that communication with learners came from Tommy who is also a Sussex graduate and is crucial in acting as a recognisable role model.

Various forms of support were considered in our first project meeting, including:

- addressing perceived digital poverty to enable greater access to school activities
- up-skilling members of the community representatives to support continued educational engagement

Particular thanks are noted to Kerry Maines, a local GRT advocate, whose passion and vision supported us to generate these ideas. The project we chose was specific to the short timescale and the need for clearly targeted provision. Consequently, we focused on building a 'soft-bridge' to education by exploring the 'lockdown' experience of young learners through creativity.

In liaison with HCC, Tommy Buck approached 24 families of HCC learners, identified by Jennie Cole. He invited them and their young learners to engage in a project around the theme of 'learning under lockdown'. The task was deliberately open to ensure they were

able to engage with the project and that the widest possible options were explored creatively and substantively. Art packs of paint, pens, tape, glue and additional resources were provided to families to allow the students to express themselves as they felt appropriate. Whilst no specific artistic parameters were created, an element of competition and a closure date was established. Tommy remained in touch supporting the families to engage.

A total of 4 families submitted artistic entries but as families worked together on the submissions there was often more than one person for each submission. In terms of total engagements with learners, we engaged with eight young people out of a target of 24. While there was a drop-off of in interest in that initially expressed amongst families, the resultant output of those who stayed engaged was remarkable, touching, and insightful.

Families who took part were sent art-packs and a gift token to thank them for their contribution to the project. The young people were also sent a certificate of completion to recognise their efforts.

## Research

We followed up with the families involved in the project and invited them to take part in a phone interview. These interviews, conducted by Emily Danvers and Tamsin Hinton-Smith, used the creative entries as prompts to explore experiences of learning under lockdown. The research was given ethical approval by the University of Sussex in July 2020. A copy of the questions we asked can be found in Appendix A.

3 out of the 4 families consented to be interviewed and we spoke to 3 parents and 2 young people in July and August 2020. These interviews were audio recorded and transcripts produced of the discussions. These transcripts were coded using data analysis software to help us consider emerging themes and patterns. Due to the small sample size, the findings below are not claimed to be the experience of *all* GRT young people during lockdown but indicate some important themes that are worthy of discussion and further research. Fundamentally, if something matters even just to one young person, it still *matters*.

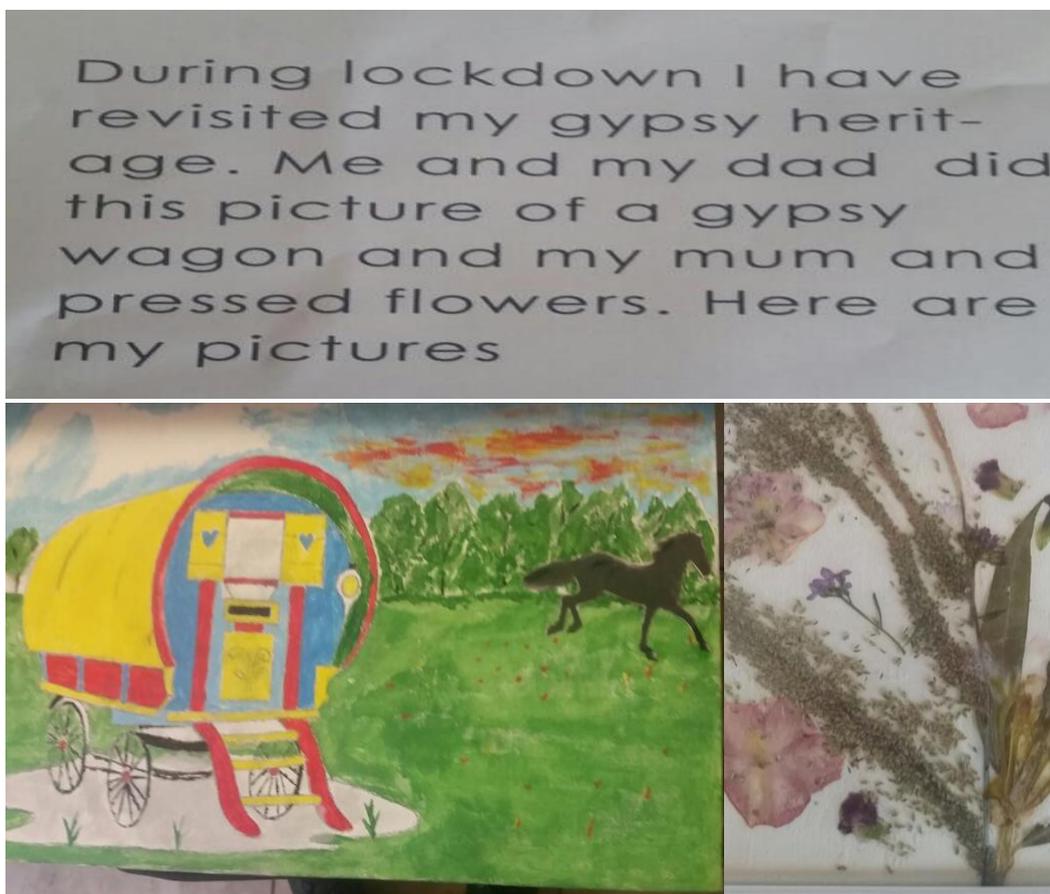


**Figure 2: Happy Young People (from Friends, Families and Travellers)**

## Findings: Learning under Lockdown Experiences

These findings draw together the creative submissions and the interview data to generate four key themes.

### 1) (Re)discovering GRT Heritage



**Figure 3: *Horse and Caravan* and *Pressed Flowers* – Creative Submissions**

**Participants told us how the experience of lockdown, in different ways, gave GRT young people and their families a chance to connect or re-connect with their GRT culture. The project itself gave a positive opportunity to share and articulate these connections.**

These art works reflect a connection that the young person felt able to make with their own heritage and culture. The inclusion of the wagon and horses is a link to Gypsy nomadic traditions, and the flowers indicate an engagement with the natural world and GRT traditions of home crafting including flower arranging, as well as the traditional prominence of paintings of flowers in GRT decorative art. The description that accompanied one of the pictures of working together with their parents to create this suggests discussions might have been had around why this 'revisiting' was important.

This was highlighted in discussions with parents and young people who stated how lockdown, in different ways, had given them a chance to connect with their GRT culture

and how the project itself gave an opportunity to have that work valued. For example, Parent 1 describes how:

*For me this project it's hopefully a platform and a step up. I'm hoping that my son can be proud of his heritage, like I am.*

*...he sat down and obviously we discussed it, and I was sitting there talking to him as he was doing it. And .it was quite uninterrupted time, so I think that as well had its positives in the respect of me and my son were part of something.*

**Parent 1**

Here, the parent reflects on how the project enabled her son to think about being GRT in a positive way and connect this with a heritage and set of values that were family focused and community minded. She also felt that in doing the work together they had a rare opportunity to discuss these topics and to feel part of something together.

June - the time in which these pictures were created - marks Gypsy, Roma and Traveller history month. HCC have made great strides to address representing GRT culture in their school - from a nominated GRT lead in the senior leadership team, to GRT literature in the library as well as a large GRT flag prominently displayed in the school. Due to lockdown, it could be that such recognitions and celebrations were of a lower priority. Moreover, there is still a potential gap between cultural celebrations and inclusive or anti-racist education. Indeed, GRT history and culture remains absent from school curricula and the young person doing this work could only do so outside of formal learning. Our interviews reveal that these sorts of opportunities to do GRT specific projects were rare:

*They wouldn't allow the Gypsy children to get together and do something as a group at school, they've never done anything like that.*

**Parent 2**

Parents and young people all mentioned the value of the previous school 'trip' (a GRT specific visit to a FE college organised by the 'Supporting Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Educational Transitions'. This, along with the learning under lockdown project, were spaces of pride and positive recognition of GRT identity and culture. There was, however, a desire from parents and young people about the need for a balance between not wishing to continually single out GRT for 'special' projects and opportunities to positively value GRT culture.

The focus on the connections with GRT culture in the artworks and interviews reveals the importance of having space in school, formally and informally, to explore themes of history, of home and of culture, in fostering inclusive education for GRT learners. Moves to decolonise curricula to reflect diverse histories and cultures of learners must, therefore, explicitly include GRT within this.

2) Complex lives and identities

*He's a very clever kid, a very clever kid...So when we sat down and did it I was like, right what are you going to put? And he was like, well I've got to put something about Boris Johnson because what is he talking about? So I was like, okay that's good. So he's unconsciously I think taken a lot more in than I gave him credit for.*

**Parent 1**

*It's just showing people during lockdown, so what's been going on. And it's got a couple of people dying... There's a school with an x going through it saying no school.*

**Young Person 1**



**Figure 4: Lockdown Poster – Creative Submission**

**GRT young people have complex lives and identities and have shown a sophisticated understanding of and engagement with the social, political and everyday impacts of Covid-19.**

This poster submission shows a mixture of images and logos that typify the ‘everyday’ politics of Covid-19. The NHS rainbows in people’s windows<sup>1</sup> and the toilet roll<sup>2</sup> are immediately familiar as everyday items that are ‘loaded’ with new significance. The images of a coffin, the virus as a globe and the large locks and bolts reveal much darker themes of death and closure. An image of England’s Prime Minister Boris Johnson at his front door testifies to how this moment is a deeply political one – particularly terms of how what happens in Westminster is directly playing out in homes and communities. This shows how sophisticated GRT young people are in being able to understand the social, political and everyday impacts of Covid-19. In the interview discussions the parent of the young person who made this image described how clever her child was and how she was surprised by how much he was absorbing of the world around him in ways she would never normally see. While it is important to understand the specific challenges faced by ‘GRT’ young people they are much more than this categorisation alone - who are engaging with the everyday politics of the Covid-19 lockdown.

Another related theme that came up was how young people took on additional responsibilities around the home or in caring for siblings. While parents reported

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/in-pictures-52542923>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/coronavirus-toilet-paper-panic-buying-covid-19-uk-australia-a9403351.html>

frustrations with motivating their young people to do schoolwork, they also reported being proud of the maturity and independence shown via these non-academic forms of learning – from watching younger siblings to helping with cooking meals. However, there was little space for this to be recognised.

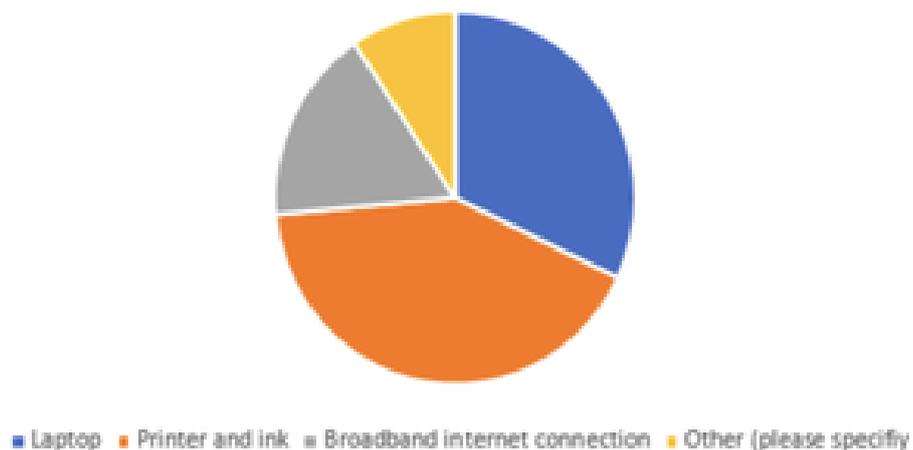
*The learning focus, the learning goals which they wanted to achieve could have been more in the aspects of social and emotional learning..*  
Parent 2

What this suggests is that there were multiple forms of ‘learning’ under lockdown – from understanding how political decision-making effects lives, to the additional emotional growth of taking on family responsibilities. Yet these currently were absent from what could be demonstrated through school home learning. This suggests a need for schools to reward and recognise formal and non-formal learning in ways that takes account of the complex lives of young people.

### 3) Digital Exclusion

**GRT learners in Sussex are experiencing digital exclusion. None of the families we worked with had adequate digital resources to do the home learning set by the school.**

Which of the following do you not have but need to teach your children at home?



The image above is from a July 2020 survey by the Travellers times which shows how Traveller families are experiencing digital exclusions that limit the ability for children to learn – from no access to devices to poor internet connections.

This finding was paralleled in our data with all of the families stating how they did not have the right facilities to do the home learning set by the school. The reasons included not

having a device per child or the time or expertise to support home learning while balancing work and caring responsibilities.

Issues of potential digital exclusion were acknowledged by schools, external funders and the UK Government. HCC took seriously the needs of their cohort and drew on national and Uni Connect funding to purchase laptops and Dongles for Wi-Fi access for their cohorts in Year 9 and 10. However, the unprecedented nature of the lockdown and the need to develop processes and funding streams meant that the delivery of laptops was delayed until the early Summer. This resulted in a lack of provision between March and July.

The response from the school in this time was sympathetic and postal worksheets were provided to learners instead. However, this made feedback on tasks and communication between teachers and learners challenging and led to a lack of engagement:

*His teachers emailed me back and were like, oh most kids do have laptops at home so it makes it a whole lot easier...but I haven't got one, I just can't go and get one just like that. So they were pretty much, oh well we'll just send it out in the post, if he does it he does it.*

**Parent 2**

While teaching online aids communication with engaged learners, effective communication and motivation strategies need to be employed with offline learners.

In addition, further funds need to be provided for schools to provide digital resources to young people excluded from online home learning. If future lockdowns and/or periods of home learning continue, the 'norm' of a learner with access to their own laptop and internet needs to be shifted to recognise that this is potentially exceptional and certainly unrepresentative of families involved with our project.

#### 4) De-personalised home schooling

**The success of learning under lockdown relied on the assumption of a 'standard' learner without support needs. Those who did not fit this model were unsupported.**

Our interview data revealed little engagement with formal home learning set by the school. One reason cited was the challenge for parents of motivating teenagers to work alongside balancing their own work and caring responsibilities, as well as some of the practical challenges detailed above:

*She [the teacher] says, it seems like you're in a good place, you're spending time and you're keeping him safe. And then she said I'll request some paperwork to come to you. I said okay that will be brilliant. I've got to say it's pretty intense. There were loads. There was absolutely loads.. it was quite intense, and to be honest as it was piling up even I was like, wow I haven't got the energy to even to try and get him to do it.... It made me feel personally that I wasn't doing enough and so it installed anxiety. But I was still working through lockdown from home.*

**Parent 1**

The success of learning under lockdown relied on the assumption of an idealised learner who was self-motivated to work unsupported and/or who had a family member to assist with schoolwork. Where parents or young people reported struggles, the school were supportive and sympathetic but ultimately were not able to make up the support or resources required:

*She [the teacher] said 'please don't worry too much about him doing his school work. If he's struggling, or he can't do, it don't worry. I said it's not that he doesn't want to do it, but a lot of it is done online.. And she was like, it's absolutely fine though, you're not going to get into trouble because you're not doing it. I said I do want him to do work though. He's been off school for so long he's going to fall behind.*

**Parent 2**

On the whole interview participants were positive about the sympathetic approach taken by the school which encouraged them (as above) to not worry about or feel burdened by home learning but to do what is best for their own children. Yet that risked some learners having lower expectations of them and being left behind academically.

Another factor was also young people with additional needs. This included both special educational needs, as well as existing and emerging mental health issues. The provision for this appeared to change during lockdown such that the support for learning was no longer available in the same way as Parent 3 describes.

*Normally, she has a lot of help at school [inaudible]. With the home-schooling, it was more tailored to the whole school group, rather than to individual academic needs.*

**Parent 3**

Although there is some evidence of growing educational success with GRT communities (Ryder and Greenfields, 2010) GRT learners in England are among the lowest achieving ethnic groups with schools and are more likely to be identified as having special educational needs (FFT, 2017). Learning under lockdown appeared to be directed towards a standard, 'unproblematic' learner and that risked marginalised those who did not fit this model. As stated above, the ideal lockdown learner needs to be understood in its complexity, recognising how falling behind might be more significant for those already struggling and how additional support is vital for such learners.



## Recommendations

This project sought to achieve a number of outcomes.

- It provided meaningful, resourced, creative engagement to young learners from the GRT community. The resultant work above provides evidence of the success of this aspect.
- It sought to explore the experience of 'lockdown' in a disadvantaged community. The creative output was insightful, poignant, and a reminder that, given appropriate support, these young learners can thrive.
- It sought to promote activity that provides a positive link with education, progression, and role models. The project demonstrated the imagination, endeavour, resilience, discipline, and motivation these young people brought to deal with a structured project with a deadline. Whilst the 'competition' was coordinated by FFT, the centrality of the student's school was clear; their engagement suggests a positive relationship both with the school, and concomitantly, with their education.
- It sought to contribute to a wider body of research on GRT young people and their engagements with education. This report will be disseminated across appropriate organisations in order to generate greater awareness, engagement, consideration, and inclusion for this marginalised community.
- It sought to support the profile of the existing local school based GRT network and its stakeholder group. The project allowed us to develop themes among young people, and with families, who had accessed previous projects. The importance of perceivable, reliable, non-invasive sustainability, in working with 'closed' communities is critical. In this scenario, working with a localised GRT community maintaining the reputations of existing education-based agencies (school, charitable advocates), growing the trust toward 'external' agents (universities, funding bodies) can only support the ideals of advancing broader support for and understanding of this community.
- We aimed to expand the network of contributors, scope of its work, and disseminate/share good practice. Ideally this type of practice, engagement, and sharing can inform practice with other GRT communities, both local and regionally. The methodology associated with this practice can be applied to, and adapted, for other marginalised groups.

One of the successes of this project will be if there is a continued opportunity to create interventions that give voice, agency, and greater inclusion to this community of learners. It is desirable that this project is just part of a raft of sustainable interventions that help grow the trust of the community in recognising that some external agents (outside of their community) can provide positive inclusive input whilst respecting the values of that said community.

We hope to continue further work as members of the *Sussex GRT Collaborative* that seeks greater understanding of this community and recognition of their value in our society. In particular we want to explore engagement with learning (formal and informal), and interventions that help these learners thrive.

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## Image Credits

Page 6. *Friends Families and Travellers*. <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/news/win-50-voucher-in-ytt-and-ffts-tiktok-competition/>

Page 12. *Travellers Times*. <https://www.travellerstimes.org.uk/news/2020/06/traveller-movements-survey-findings-reveal-education-challenges-young-people-face>

## Appendix A

### **Interview questions for young people**

1. Tell us about the piece of work you chose to produce for the lockdown project – what did you write/draw about? What made you choose this idea? How did you feel about doing the work? Do you want to say any more about it?
2. What has the lockdown been like for you?
3. How has lockdown been different to normal life for you?
4. What have been the best and worst things about the lockdown?
5. What could your teachers learn from you about life under lockdown?
6. What could your school have done better differently during lockdown?
7. When lockdown ends will it have left your life different to before in any ways?

### **Interview questions for adult carers**

1. Tell us about your child's engagement with the project – how do you feel about the piece of work they chose to produce for the lockdown project? Did they seem to enjoy it? Do you want to say any more about it?
2. If you chose to produce a piece of writing or drawing yourself relating to lockdown, we would like to hear more about this - what did you write/draw about? What made you choose this idea? How did you feel about doing the work? Do you want to say any more about it?
3. What do you feel the lockdown has been like for your child(ren)?
4. How has lockdown been different to normal life for your children?
5. What have been the best and worst things about the lockdown for your children?
6. What could your teachers learn from you about life under lockdown for young people?
7. What could your child's school have done better differently during lockdown?
8. When lockdown ends will it have left your life different to before for your children in any ways?