

Moored but still isolated.

Addressing Barriers for the Bargees in West Berkshire 2025

(Members of the Gypsy, Romany and Traveler GRT Communities)



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Working Together for Better Access.

Focusing on the Bargee community

This report investigates the healthcare challenges faced by the Bargee community in West Berkshire.

The Bargee community are classed as seldom heard and this is mainly because this community have a completely different lifestyle to the majority of the population.

Due to their mobile lifestyle, they often lack access to common amenities and information-sharing platforms. They do not access information in the same way as the general population, which leads to their exclusion from standard communication channels used by services and organisations within the area.

“This isn’t because they have less rights, it’s simply because they choose to live an unconventional lifestyle.”

This group has been included in the 1st Priority of the Berkshire West Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2021-2030– The differences in Health between different groups of people.

To make a difference, they have pledged to:

Ensure services and support are accessible to those most in need through effective signposting, targeted health education, promoting digital inclusion and in particular addressing sensory and communication needs. All in a way that empowers communities to take ownership of their own health.¹

Healthwatch West Berkshire had heard from some Bargees who were struggling to access health care and so we decided to go out and speak with them to find out the issues they were facing.

¹Berkshire West Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2021-2030 Dec. 2021i.pdf - page 15

Our Aims:

For the Bargee Community:

- Visit the Bargees in different parts of West Berkshire to assess common healthcare issues.
- Provide signposting to ensure access to both local and primary care services.
- Distribute NHS information cards clarifying registration rights.

For Healthcare Providers:

- To improve awareness of mandatory registration requirements.
- Engage with primary services to streamline healthcare access.

Our Actions:

Bargee Community Engagement

To understand and address healthcare accessibility challenges, we engaged with the Bargee community across 4 key areas along the canal: Theale, Pangbourne, Newbury and Hungerford.

Community Outreach:

We visited multiple locations to listen to Bargees' concerns about accessing local healthcare services.

Collaboration:

We worked alongside Solutions4Health who were conducting Mobile Health Checks on behalf of West Berkshire Council, allowing for a holistic approach to health and wellbeing.

Signposting:

We directed individuals to the West Berkshire Directory and relevant local services to improve their access to healthcare.

Engagement with Primary Care Services:

Before conducting outreach, we contacted GPs, dentists, and pharmacies in each area to secure their agreement to provide services to the boating/GRT community.

We placed Healthwatch West Berkshire posters and "Have Your Say" (HYS) forms in surgeries, dental practices, and pharmacies to encourage feedback and awareness.

NHS Information Distribution:

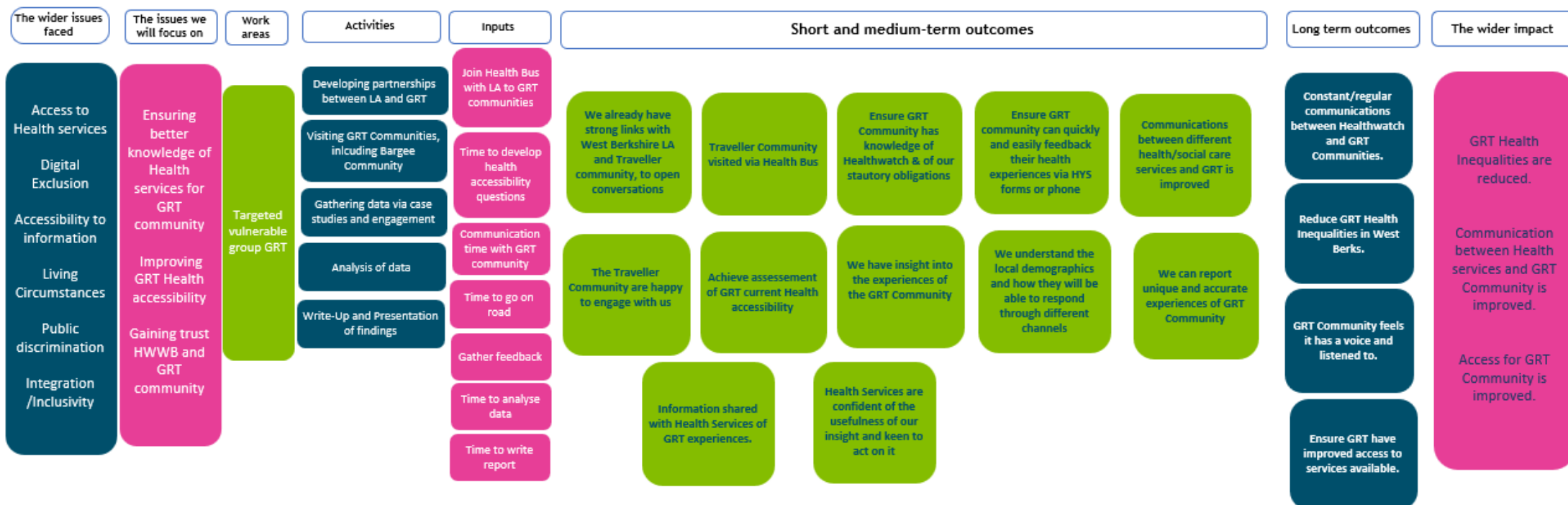
We provided **NHS access cards** to Bargee community members, clarifying that:

- **No fixed address** is required for GP or dental registration.
- **No identification** is needed.
- **Anyone in England** has the right to access primary healthcare.
- For further issues, they can call **0300 311 2233** or visit [**www.nhs.uk/register**](https://www.nhs.uk/register).

Participating Healthcare Services

Service Type	Location	Name
GP Surgeries	Hungerford	The Hungerford Surgery
	Thatcham	Burdwood Surgery
	Newbury	Strawberry Hill Surgery
	Pangbourne	The Boat House
Dental Practices	Hungerford	My Dentist
	Thatcham	Thatcham Dental Partners
	Newbury	Oaktree Dental Practice
	Pangbourne	High Street Dental Care
Pharmacies	Hungerford	Boots Pharmacy
	Thatcham	Thatcham Pharmacy
	Newbury	Day Lewis Pharmacy
	Pangbourne	Pangbourne Pharmacy

Theory of Change



Case Studies

We heard experiences from a total of **23 individuals** living on barges across West Berkshire.

The Bargee community was open and willing to share their experiences. They completed our survey but chose to remain anonymous and declined to be photographed.

Themes of exclusion, limited access to healthcare and frustration emerged throughout these stories (names have been changed for the purpose of anonymity).

Andy's Struggle: Barred from help, without Proof of Address -

Andy, a Bargee living in Kintbury, approached the local surgery for help with his mental health, describing himself as being "on the edge of a breakdown."

However, unfortunately the response which he relayed to us was anything but supportive.

The local GP practice informed him that they couldn't provide assistance or signpost him to any local mental health services, unless he first registered as a patient. He was then told that registering with the surgery required proof of a fixed address—something Andy, like many other local residents, cannot provide.



"It felt like a dead end. When you're desperate for help and they shut the door on you, where do you go?"

Andy – Oct '24



This technical barrier left Andy feeling abandoned and unsupported during a critical time.

Limited Awareness and Accessibility –

James, another Bargee, shared a simpler but equally impactful struggle:

③ **I didn't know that I could go and see a local doctor near my mooring if I was sick.** ④

James – Oct '24

The lack of clear communication and guidance about accessing local healthcare, while living a mobile lifestyle, left James unaware of his rights and options.

Vaccinations withheld –

Jian, who belongs to a high-risk health group, was denied COVID-19 and flu vaccinations at a Surgery in late November:

③ **The receptionist said I was too late – 'out of season.' But for me, these vaccines were not a luxury; they were a necessity.** ④ Jian – Oct '24

This refusal jeopardised Jian's health and highlighted the need for more flexible and inclusive healthcare policies for mobile communities.

Delays and Incompetence –

Patrick recounted his experience with delayed blood test results:

③ **My first sample was lost, and I had to wait weeks for another appointment and even longer for the results. It was incredibly stressful, especially as I was worried about what they might show.** ④

Patrick – Oct '24

Disjointed Communication –

John faced similar challenges with continuity of care while moving between counties:



“Hospitals don’t share information. I couldn’t get my scan results because I kept changing locations.”

John – Oct '24



This lack of communication and coordination among healthcare providers left John feeling lost in the system, unsure of how to access critical follow-up care.

Denied Care –

Carl told us of how he had experienced outright refusal of treatment for a chest infection from a local GP practice because he could not provide a fixed address:

③ **It was as if my illness didn’t matter, unless I could tick their bureaucratic boxes.** ⑨
Carl – Oct '24

Disjointed Care –

Brian’s feedback involved a visit to a local Hospital’s A&E with multiple injuries, this encounter revealed another troubling gap:



“They treated my head injury but told me they could only deal with one issue at a time. I had to return another day for my broken nose and jaw.”

Brian – Oct '24



This approach to care (which is not feedback we’ve heard previously), combined with the logistical challenges of returning, left Brian feeling neglected.

Clash of Beliefs and Medical Approaches –

Keeran, an Irish Traveller living on a barge, expressed frustration with the lack of respect for his preference for natural remedies over conventional medicine:



"I don't trust modern medicine or vaccines. The GP didn't offer any natural treatment options and seemed more interested in prescribing pills. They need more education about alternative approaches."



Keeran – Oct '24

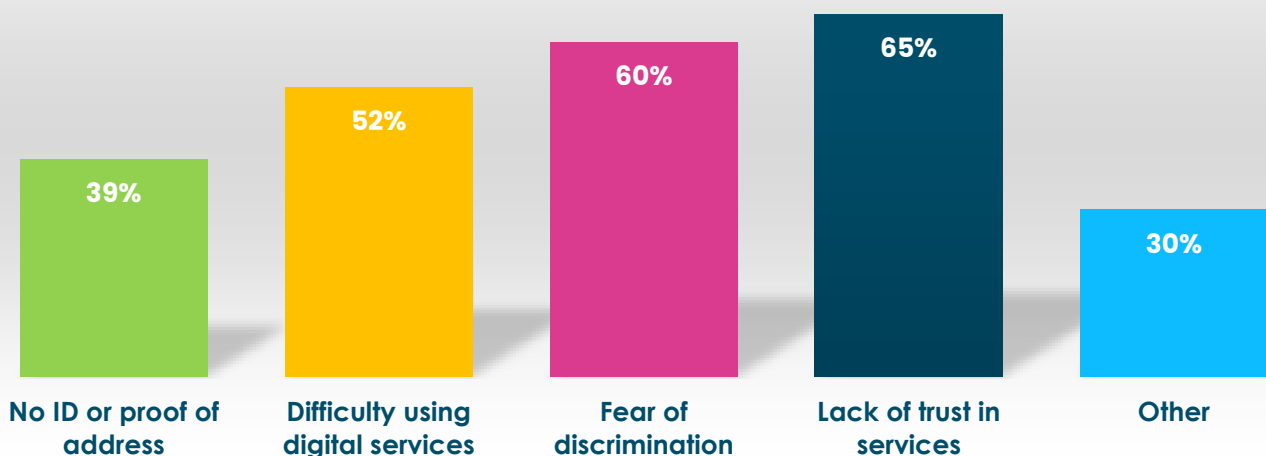
Keeran's story highlights a need for greater cultural sensitivity and awareness among healthcare providers to address diverse medical beliefs.

Silent Struggles and the Call for Change

These stories reveal systemic barriers faced by Bargees in accessing Health Care, from proof-of-address requirements and lack of awareness to disjointed care and cultural insensitivity. These experiences are not isolated; they represent the struggles of a community that are often overlooked by Health Care services.

By addressing these barriers, healthcare providers can better support this unique and vulnerable population, ensuring that individuals like Andy, Jian and Carl receive the care they need, regardless of their lifestyle or culture.

Barriers to accessing local healthcare services (multiple choice).



Key Findings

Healthcare Needs of West Berks Boating Communities

Healthwatch West Berkshire's engagement with the Bargee community revealed significant challenges in accessing and trusting local healthcare services. The findings highlight key barriers and concerns affecting healthcare access and equity for this population.

Based on the survey responses from **23 participants** within West Berkshires boating communities, the key findings regarding their access to healthcare services are:

Demographics:

- Ethnicity: **73% (17 Individuals)** identified as White British, while **17% (4 Individuals)** identified as Traveller.
- Gender: The majority of respondents were male (**78%, 18 Individuals**).

Access to Healthcare:

Healthcare Refusals: 43% (10 Individuals) reported **being refused healthcare services**.

Common reasons included:

- Lack of ID or proof of address.
- Perceived **discrimination or misunderstanding of their circumstances**.

Barriers to Accessing Healthcare:

- **39% (9 individuals)** struggled due to lack of ID or proof of address.
- **52% (12 individuals)** found it difficult to use digital services for appointments and registration.
- **60% (14 Individuals)** feared discrimination from healthcare providers.
- **65% (15 Individuals)** expressed a lack of trust in healthcare services.
- **30% (7 Individuals)** cited additional barriers, such as financial constraints and geographical challenges.

Trust and Service Satisfaction:

Low Trust in Healthcare Providers –

- Only **8% (2 Individuals)** expressed confidence in local healthcare services.
- **47% (11 Individuals)** reported a complete lack of trust in providers.

Unmet Healthcare Needs:

- Just **8%** (**2** Individuals) felt their healthcare needs were being met.
- **52%** (**12** Individuals) believed local services were failing to address their needs.

Conclusion

Implementing the following recommendations should help to create a more equitable and accessible healthcare system, not only for West Berks boating communities but also for all of the Gypsy/Roma/Traveller communities in West Berkshire too.

By addressing the unique barriers they face, local healthcare providers can continue to build trust which will ensure better health outcomes for all residents, regardless of their living situation.

More knowledge and training for local primary healthcare services and their staff would benefit both service users and the services staff.

This will hopefully prove to be invaluable going forward, where this awareness can be called upon to form a precedent for reasonable adjustments and ideally total inclusivity.



Recommendations

Based on survey findings and our direct engagement with the Bargee community, the following key recommendations aim to improve healthcare access and equity for boating communities:

1. Clear and Consistent NHS Registration Guidance.

- GP surgeries must ensure clarity and consistency in their patient registration process for individuals without a fixed address, in line with **NHS guidelines**: [How to register with a GP](#)
- Staff should **be trained and reminded** that proof of address and identification are **not required** for GP or dental registration.
- Practices should display **visible signage** confirming these rights in waiting rooms and on their websites.

2. Inclusive and Equitable Healthcare for GRT Communities

- **Mandatory training** should be provided for **GPs, dentists, pharmacists, and reception staff** on the unique **lifestyles, challenges, and healthcare needs** of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveler (GRT) communities.
- Healthcare providers must ensure **compliance with the UK Equality Act 2010**, making **reasonable adjustments** to accommodate the boating community.
- **Anti-discrimination protocols** should be implemented to promote **trust and inclusivity** within local healthcare services.

3. Improve Education and Communication

- Increase awareness of healthcare access rights for mobile populations by:
- **Distributing printed materials** at **key community locations** such as food banks, soup kitchens, and mental health services.
- **Placing hard-copy health information** in **non-traditional locations**, including **canal-side notice boards, mooring sites, and service hubs**.
- Working with organisations such as the **Kennet and Avon Canal Trust** and the **Canal and River Trust** to distribute digital and physical resources.

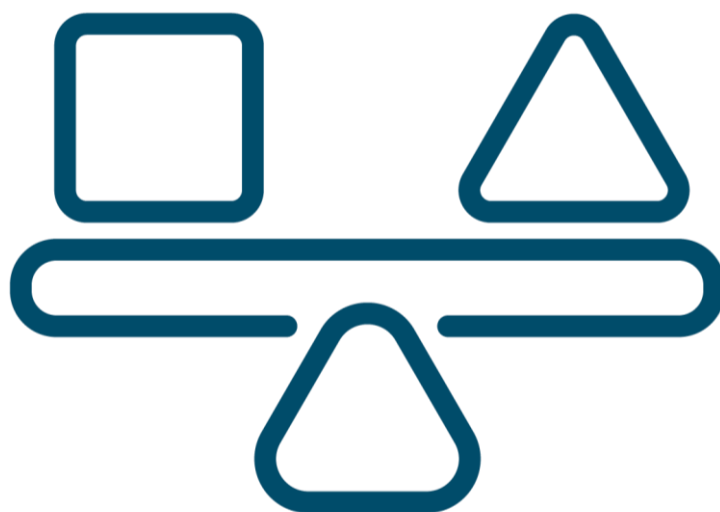
- Develop **easy-to-read, visual guides** (e.g., posters, infographics) explaining how to access healthcare without a fixed address.

4. Improve Coordination Between Healthcare Providers

- Enhance **information sharing** between **hospitals, GP practices, and clinics** to ensure continuity of care for transient patients.
- Consider providing **physical medical records** or a '**Care Passport**' to patients who frequently move across county lines, ensuring their medical history is accessible across regions.

5. Increase availability of Mobile and Flexible Healthcare Services

- Expand **mobile health clinics** along the canal network to provide **GP, dental, and vaccination** services for Bargee communities.
- Improve access to **repeat prescriptions** by partnering with pharmacies to provide flexible collection points.
- Consider **designated 'Bargee-Friendly' healthcare** providers in key locations, ensuring they are well-informed and accessible to this community.



Acknowledgments

Healthwatch West Berkshire would like to extend our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to the **Bargee Primary Care Access Report**. This project would not have been possible without the dedication, time, and support of so many individuals and organisations, all of whom played a vital role in helping to highlight the healthcare challenges faced by the Bargee community and ensuring their voices were heard.

First and foremost, we wish to thank the Bargee community members who took the time to speak with us and share their experiences. Your willingness to engage has provided invaluable insight into the barriers you face in accessing healthcare and has shaped the recommendations in this report.

Our thanks also go to Wendy from **Solutions 4 Health**, who were happy to join us Canalside, to offer their Mobile Health Checks to the Bargee community. (Commissioned by West Berkshire Council.)

We would also like to acknowledge the following key partners and stakeholders for their continued support and involvement:

Ethnic Minority and Traveler Achievement Service (EMTAS) – West Berkshire Council

Cheryl Willett – **Specialist Public Health Officer (SPO), West Berkshire Council**

Additionally, we appreciate the cooperation of local healthcare providers who engaged with us and helped ensure that the Bargee community had access to services. These include:

The Boat House – Pangbourne, **Pangbourne Pharmacy** – Pangbourne, **High Street Dental Care** – Pangbourne, **Strawberry Hill Surgery** – Newbury, **Day Lewis Pharmacy** – Newbury, **Oaktree Dental Practice** – Newbury, **Burdwood Surgery** – Thatcham, **Thatcham Dental Partners** – Thatcham, **Thatcham Pharmacy** – Thatcham, **The Hungerford Surgery** – Hungerford, **My Dentist** – Hungerford, **Boots Pharmacy** – Hungerford.

Responses

Survey Question Set

1. What is your Ethnicity?

Gypsy Roma Traveller
Other (please, specify.....)

2. What is your gender?

Male Female Non-Binary Prefer not to answer

3. Have you ever been refused healthcare services (e.g., GP registration)?

Yes

No

(If 'yes', please tell us what the reason was.....)

4. What barriers have you faced when accessing healthcare services?

No ID or proof of address

Difficulty using digital services

Fear of discrimination

Trust in Services

Other (please, specify.....)

5. Do you trust healthcare providers to give you and your family proper care?

Yes

No

Sometimes

6. Do you feel that healthcare services meet the needs of GRT communities?

Yes No Unsure

7. What would make healthcare services better for GRT communities?

More cultural understanding from staff

Easier registration without ID or proof of address

More outreach to the community

Other (please, specify.....)

Survey Results

This report highlights the challenges faced by individuals in boating communities when accessing healthcare services, based on survey responses from 23 participants.

1. Ethnicity:

73.9% of respondents (17 individuals) identify as White British.

17.4% of respondents (4 individuals) identify as Traveller.

4.3% of respondents (1 individual) identify as White French.

4.3% of respondents (1 individual) identify as Chinese British.

2. Gender:

78.3% of respondents (18 individuals) identify as Male.

17.4% of respondents (4 individuals) identify as Female.

4.3% of respondents (1 individual) preferred not to answer.

3. Refusal of Healthcare Services:

43.48% of respondents (10 individuals) reported being refused healthcare services.

56.52% (13 individuals) had not experienced a refusal.

Reasons for Refusal –

Respondents who answered "Yes" provided various reasons, including:

- Lack of ID or proof of address.
- Discrimination.
- Misunderstanding or mistrust of their unique circumstances.

4. Barriers to Accessing local Healthcare Services:

Respondents identified multiple barriers, including:

No ID or proof of address: 39.13% (9 individuals).

Difficulty using digital services: 52.17% (12 individuals).

Fear of discrimination: 60.87% (14 individuals).

Lack of trust in services: 65.22% (15 individuals).

Other reasons: 30.43% (7 individuals) included financial constraints, accessibility, and geographical challenges.

5. Trust in Healthcare Providers:

Trust levels were notably low:

Yes: 8.70% (2 individuals).

No: 47.83% (11 individuals).

Sometimes: 43.48% (10 individuals).

These figures indicate widespread skepticism toward healthcare providers among boating communities.

6. Healthcare Services Meeting Community Needs

Only 8.70% (2 individuals) felt that healthcare services met their needs.

52.17% (12 individuals) believed their needs were not met.

39.13% (9 individuals) were unsure.

This finding highlights a significant gap between the healthcare services provided and the unique needs of boating communities.



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