



Robin Walker MP

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Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Chair, Education Select Committee
House of Commons
London
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By email: educom@parliament.uk

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Dear Robert,

Thank you for your letter and for the opportunity to discuss the educational outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils with the Committee.

As I set out in our discussion, this Government is committed to levelling up opportunity so that everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their hard work will take them, whatever their background. This principle is hard-wired into all of our work at the Department for Education and has been the driving force behind our education reforms since 2010. There is still more to do to deliver and embed our reforms, and in particular to respond to the impact of the pandemic, to ensure all children and young people can reach their potential and experience the transformative effect of a high-quality education.

I have addressed your specific questions in turn below.

Early intervention

*You said: We know that the Department is working with the National Centre for Family Hubs, and you have committed to **publish best practice guidance on access and inclusion**, including for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families. We look forward to receiving this guidance before the end of this year. We would like to know how progress will be monitored to ensure the guidance is effective in engaging with parents from these communities.*

Family hubs are a way of joining up locally and bringing existing family services together to improve access, connections between families, professionals, services, and providers, and putting relationships at the heart of family support. Family hubs work with families with children of all ages (0-19) or up to 25 with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), with a great Start for Life offer at their core. In October 2021, as part of the Autumn budget, the Government announced £300m to transform Start for Life and Family Hub services in half of the council areas across England (75 upper-tier

local authorities).

As I set out to the Committee, we have established a National Centre for Family Hubs, which is being run by the Anna Freud Centre. They will publish guidance on Access and Inclusion, including in relation to GRT families, later this year, as part of a suite of materials that are intended to support local authorities to ensure that their family hub models are informed by the best evidence and practice. The National Centre will keep its products and how they are used under review.

A full evaluation will look at how effectively the Family Hubs engage with parents, informed by the learning from the 75 funded local authorities.

Parental Engagement – Adult Literacy

You said: “*We would like to receive more information on **how the Government plans to allocate the available [adult education budget] funding to have a real impact upon parents from these communities with low literacy levels.***”

As you are aware, the Adult Education Budget (AEB) is £1.34bn in the 2021/22 academic year. AEB funds skills provision from pre-entry to level 3, to support eligible adults aged 19 and over to gain the skills they need for work, an apprenticeship or further learning. This includes statutory entitlements to fully funded courses in English and maths, up to and including level 2, for adult learners who have not previously attained a GCSE grade C/4 or higher.

The AEB also includes Community Learning funding which enables more flexible tailored programmes of learning, to help eligible learners engage in learning, build confidence and/or enhance their wellbeing. Providers are required to prioritise the funding of disadvantaged learners and one of the many objectives of this provision is helping parents/carers to be better equipped to support and encourage their children’s learning and to learn together.

In the 2021/22 academic year, approximately 60% of the AEB is devolved to 9 Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) and the Mayor of London, acting where appropriate through the Greater London Authority (GLA). These authorities are now responsible for the provision of AEB-funded adult education for their residents, including the statutory entitlements, and allocation of the AEB to providers.

The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) is responsible for the remaining AEB in non-devolved areas which is allocated to colleges, Local Authorities and training providers who have the freedom and flexibility to determine how they use their AEB to meet the needs of their communities. This could involve targeting specific communities back into learning, including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

It is the responsibility of providers to plan, with local partners, what is delivered locally. The rules for Community Learning provision state:

- “You must engage and work closely with a wide range of relevant partners and stakeholders in your local area to help shape your community learning offer to engage specific groups.”

The Community Learning objectives also ask providers to:

- “Focus public funding on people who are disadvantaged and least likely to participate, including in rural areas and people on low incomes with low skills.”
- “Commission, deliver and support learning in ways that contribute directly to these objectives, including bringing together people from backgrounds, cultures and income groups, including people who can/cannot afford to pay.”

You also asked for “***An update on how the Government plans to engage with parents from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities within the next six months.***”

We do not design education policy to target certain groups of pupils based on ethnicity, but instead are focused on improving outcomes for all children. We know that the most significant factor affecting pupil attainment, which cuts across all ethnicities, is economic disadvantage. A great education for wealthier pupils is a great education for disadvantaged pupils, of all races and ethnicities and we will continue to push for equal access to an education of the highest standard for all pupils.

The DfE runs a GRT stakeholder group which meets termly and is the forum for the DfE to understand the concerns of the GRT community. The group is chaired by Baroness Whitaker. There are also three Vice-Chairs, and they are all Gypsy, Roma or Traveller.

Parental Engagement – Staff role models

You said: “***We recommend a provision of funds for schools with high Roma communities, to promote inclusion and employ Learning Support Assistants from these communities, to improve the educational attainment of Roma pupils.***”

Schools are responsible for their own decisions on employment issues. We expect schools, like all employers, to give due consideration to their obligations under the Equality Act 2010 and the way their employment practices affect different sections of their communities. The following guidance is provided to schools [Guidance for employers about their responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010](#).

The Equality Act allows employers to take 'positive action' in certain circumstances to enable or encourage under-represented groups to overcome disadvantage. This could include training or mentoring schemes aimed at such under-represented groups.

Educational attainment – Pupil Premium

You said: ***“We would like to know how the Government plans to support schools to encourage greater uptake of pupil premium for eligible pupils from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities”***

We want to make sure as many eligible pupils as possible are claiming their free school meals, and hence becoming eligible for pupil premium. We are therefore making it as simple as possible for schools and local authorities to determine eligibility. To support this we: **(i)** provide an Eligibility Checking System (ECS) to make the checking process as quick and straightforward as possible for schools and local authorities **(ii)** have developed a model registration form to help schools encourage parents to sign up for free school meals; and **(iii)** provide guidance to Jobcentre Plus advisers so that they can make Universal Credit recipients aware that they may also be entitled to wider benefits, including free school meals.

We know that the most significant factor affecting pupil attainment, which cuts across all ethnicities (including GRT pupils), is economic disadvantage. This is why since 2011 we have continued to provide pupil premium funding for school leaders to tackle the challenges faced by their disadvantaged pupils (including GRT pupils), and so improve their achievement at school.

Over **40%** of GRT pupils are eligible for free school meals (and therefore Pupil Premium), more than double the percentage of all pupils. Pupil Premium funding can be used for the benefit of any pupils that schools consider in need of support.

Educational attainment – Attendance

You said: ***“The Committee welcomes the Department’s recent announcements to reduce persistent and severe absences within schools and would like an update on how the measures are improving absences, including for Gypsy Roma and Traveller pupils, by the end of this year”***

As previously described, we have a **comprehensive attendance strategy** that has been implemented since the beginning of this academic year for all pupils to ensure that absence is minimised. We are continuing to closely monitor absence levels and trends.

The Secretary of State has established an alliance of national leaders from education, children’s social care and allied services to work together to raise school attendance and reduce persistent absence. The Attendance

Action Alliance has pledged to take a range of actions to remove barriers preventing children attending school.

Officials have engaged with GRT stakeholders when they were developing our recent consultation. We will do so again as we develop the planned revisions to school attendance guidance.

We will provide an update about our initiatives to improve pupil attendance in due course. We will also continue to collect and publish pupil absence data on a regular basis.

Educational attainment – Careers guidance

You said: *“We recommend **schools should provide targeted career guidance for these communities**, to better inform them of the career opportunities available through engagement with education”*

Schools are expected to develop and improve their careers provision for young people in line with the world-class Gatsby Benchmarks, including benchmark 3 which focuses on addressing the individual needs of each pupil.

The careers statutory guidance is structured around how to meet the benchmarks for all young people. Careers leaders should work closely with the relevant teachers and professionals in their school or college, including the Special Educational Needs Coordinator and inclusion teams, and the careers adviser, to identify the guidance needs of all pupils and put in place personalised support and a transition plan. Schools should recognise the opportunity to improve social mobility by identifying any barriers the pupils may have and identify the support needed to maximise their life chances. By helping pupils and their families to understand the full range of relevant education, training and employment opportunities, such as traineeships and apprenticeships, supported internships or routes into higher education progression it will enable them to consider the widest possible range of careers.

The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) runs a Community of Practice focused on inclusion. Schools, colleges and training providers work together to support each other in their local community to work with pupils from disadvantaged groups through the sharing of good practice and the development of resources. The CEC has run pilots with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community to **develop resources and test new approaches to broaden aspirations and raise awareness of pathways into training and work**. The evaluation of the pilots was delayed due to Covid 19 but we would like to build on the results of the pilots and explore the potential for expanding some of this targeted support.

A high proportion of participants (62%) in the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller focused projects also had SEND.

The objectives for these pilots were:

1. Raised careers aspirations
2. Increased confidence / self- efficacy
3. Better knowledge of potential careers, pathways and sources of IAG
4. Motivation to do well in education/see value to career path
5. Individual career plan / Clear idea of next steps
6. Feeling empowered to make choices for learning and employment

To increase the numbers of young people from ethnic minorities in apprenticeships, the DfE is, since November 2021, working with DWP and partner bodies and employers on a major communications campaign 'Get the Jump: Skills for Life'. This campaign will engage directly with young people across the country to promote apprenticeships, using a range of mechanisms to attract more ethnic minority starts. The campaign will include events in schools with strong minority representation, relatable role models, employer testimonies, and data on potential earnings and career progression. It will also explore the impact of factors that influence a young persons' career choices.

Identifying incidents of bullying and racism

You said: *"You spoke of recent funding on anti-bullying activities and specific work targeted towards Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. **We would be grateful if you could update the Committee on this specific work and when it will be implemented to support these communities.**"*

The Government is committed to supporting schools to prevent and tackle all forms of bullying in order to comply with its obligations under the PSED. Different groups within society have different needs. The underlying principle is that schools are best placed to drive their own improvements, based on their individual needs and circumstances. The government does not set out a particular approach to bullying that schools should follow.

The Department's current advice is that schools should develop their own approaches for monitoring bullying and exercise their own judgement as to what will work best for their pupils.

The issue of how schools respond to, and take steps to eliminate, instances of bullying is an important part of Ofsted's school inspections, as set out in its school inspection handbook. All Ofsted's inspectors receive training on inspecting this matter, and they will expect that in a school with good behaviour and attitudes, leaders, staff and pupils create a positive environment in which bullying is not tolerated. If bullying, aggression, discrimination and derogatory language occur, inspectors will expect that to be dealt with quickly and effectively so that it is not allowed to spread.

The Department is providing over £2 million funding from August 2021 to March 2023 to five anti-bullying organisations to support schools in their efforts to tackle bullying. The organisations are the Anti-Bullying Alliance, the Anne Frank Trust, the Diana Award, EqualiTeach and Diversity Role Models. Schools and colleges are able to contact the organisations directly to request this support.

In terms of specific anti-bullying work targeted at Gypsy, Roma and Traveller

communities, the Anti-Bullying Alliance's 'United Against Bullying' (UAB) programme provides training and resources which specifically cover bullying of GRT children. The programme is already underway: it is funded for three years (2021-2024) and the first phase of the programme is running from November 2021 - July 2022.

Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities

Our response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 'Inclusive Britain', sets out a ground-breaking action plan to tackle negative disparities, promote unity and build a fairer Britain for all.

It is guided by well-established evidence, informed by the findings of the independent Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, and built on three overarching aims: Trust and fairness, opportunity and agency, and inclusion.

For all children to reach their potential they need an ambitious, knowledge-rich curriculum, taught by great teachers in schools with high expectations and good pupil behaviour. That is why we will continue to press ahead with helping all children from all backgrounds and ethnicities receive a great education by attending a great school.

We will improve the reporting of data on ethnicity to make it more transparent and granular, including stopping the use of unhelpful categorisations such as BAME.

We will carry out analysis and research to better understand patterns of attainment amongst ethnic minorities and how the best MATs are reducing these differences to deliver great results for all their pupils.

Exclusions

You said: *"When giving evidence to the Committee, you emphasised that schools should follow the statutory guidance to consider what extra support might be needed to identify and address the needs of children from groups with protected characteristics. Despite the statutory guidance, exclusion rates are higher amongst the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and **we want to know how this issue is being tackled by the Government.**"*

As you heard, schools have a statutory duty not to discriminate against pupils based on protected characteristics, such as disability or race. Schools should give particular consideration to the fair treatment of pupils from groups who are vulnerable to permanent exclusion.

On 3 February we launched an 8-week public consultation on the revised non statutory Behaviour in Schools guidance and the statutory Suspension and Permanent Exclusion guidance and associated regulations. These will equip headteachers to create calm, orderly, safe, and supportive school environments where all pupils can thrive and reach their potential in safety and dignity and where exclusions are only ever used lawfully, and when absolutely necessary as a last resort. The consultation closed on the 31 March 2022.

The consultation also asked key questions to inform our wider ambitious programme of work on school behaviour to rapidly improve the availability of good Alternative Provision as part of the SEND Review so that permanently excluded children and children at risk of exclusion receive high-quality education and support suited to their individual needs.

We worked with stakeholders to encourage those from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities to contribute to this important consultation. The Government's response to the consultation and final guidance for schools will be published during the summer term 2022.

The revised guidance has additional information for governing boards to carefully consider the level and characteristics of pupils who are leaving a school and deploy maximum challenge to the school and academy trust management teams on any permanent exclusions to ensure it is only used as a last resort.

Elective Home Education

You said: ***"In the Government's response to this letter, we would like clarity on when this register will be introduced by the Government."***

The 'Children Not In School' consultation response, published on 3 February 2022, reaffirmed our commitment to proceed with the proposals and create a local authority registration system for children not in school. The system will help local authorities undertake their existing duties to ensure children receive a suitable education, as well as safeguard children who are in scope.

We hope to legislate for the proposals outlined in the consultation response at the next suitable opportunity.

I hope this goes some way in responding to your question. Please do let me know if you need anything further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robin Walker', written in a cursive style.

Robin Walker MP

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