



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Rt Hon Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top
Chair, House of Lords Public Services
Committee
House of Lords
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Paul Scully MP

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Dear Baroness Armstrong,

Thank you for your letter of 17 May to the previous Secretary of State about the non-inquiry session the Committee held on access to public services for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. You have raised questions that you want the Government to address, and the Secretary of State has asked me to respond to these as Minister of State at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I note that none of your questions relate to how we promote integration, improve relations between travelling and settled communities nor how we reduce enforcement costs for local authorities and police in dealing with unauthorised encampments. I should put on record that each of these is central to better social outcomes for people from GRT backgrounds and remain priorities for this government.

1. What specific action is the Government taking to address the inequalities faced by each of the communities that fall under the term ‘Gypsy, Roma and Traveller’?

The Government launched the £10 million Traveller Site Fund on 20 March 2022, providing capital funding for 2022/23 to build new and refurbished transit and permanent traveller sites and temporary stopping places and facilities for travellers. We believe that by providing pleasant, authorised places with facilities for travellers to live, and by providing access to local services and facilities, particularly including education and health services, the life chances and outcome of travellers will improve.

Our Planning Policy for Traveller Sites sets out that local authorities should ensure that traveller sites are sustainable economically, socially and environmentally ensuring that (amongst other matters) policies provide for proper consideration of the effect of local environmental quality (such as noise and air quality) on the health and well-being of travellers that may locate there.

Our £11.5 billion Affordable Homes Programme 2021/26 funding can be used by both local authorities and Registered Social Housing providers to provide new permanent and transit sites for travellers.

We have so far invested £1.4 million in targeted educational support in some local authority areas for Gypsy Roma and Traveller children and young people. This funding is to boost educational attainment, drop-out rates and improve pathways to employment for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children. More than 14,000 Gypsy, Roma, Traveller pupils qualify for free school meals.

The Government, through the Health and Wellbeing Alliance, have commissioned health guidance for Roma communities. The guidance has been developed by the Roma Support Group, which is part of the Health and Wellbeing Alliance and NHS England. This is the first time a Roma led organisation has worked in partnership with the voluntary sector and government to reduce health disparities.

The NHS produced a film to educate, inform and answer common questions about the COVID-19 vaccine to boost vaccine confidence within traveller groups. The film follows renowned Romany journalist Jake Bowers as he investigates what he and others in the nomadic communities can personally do to help society move on from the pandemic.

In some areas, the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are disproportionately represented within the rough sleeping cohort. The Government is clear that no one should be without a roof over their head and that is why we have committed to ending rough sleeping by the end of this parliament. To support this, we have already pledged £2 billion to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping over the next three years, ensuring that local authorities have the tools they need to support the most vulnerable.

Programmes such as the Rough Sleeping Initiative work closely with local authorities to develop support that meets the specific needs of their communities. For example, through previous rounds of Rough Sleeping Initiative, we have funded Roma mediator posts in order to conduct outreach and ongoing specialist support in local areas with high numbers of Roma street homeless. This support includes helping individuals access immediate and longer-term health support as well accessing available accommodation during the pandemic. More broadly, we continue to provide funding to extend outreach services within local authority areas which could be used to facilitate engagement with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

We have also introduced new duties on local authorities in England, within the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, to provide support for victims of domestic abuse and their children who need safe accommodation. These duties came into force on 1st October 2021 and are designed to ensure that all victims and their children across England can access the right support in safe accommodation if they need to flee their home, including victims from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. The accompanying statutory guidance is clear that local authorities should provide tailored support services to meet the needs of all victims on the basis of assessed local needs. The guidance specifies that this should include consideration of the needs of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and it encourages local authorities to work with local specialist services to assess and provide for those needs.

2. Which departments are involved in tackling these inequalities, and how do they coordinate work across Government?

Over the years, Government departments have been working collaboratively across a broad set of policy themes to tackle disparities and improve outcomes for all, including people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds.

3. What progress has been made to improve the available data on GRT communities, and, in particular, disaggregated data on each of the communities that fall under this term?

The Race Disparity Unit published a data [Quality Improvement Plan](#) in 2020. In this they committed to work with departments to maintain a harmonised approach to collecting data about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people. The Race Disparity Unit is now working with the Government Statistical Service (GSS) harmonisation team in the Office for National Statistics to help develop a new harmonised standard for ethnicity as part of their [harmonisation priorities workplan](#).

The Quality Improvement Plan also included a commitment to provide advice on how the robustness and coverage of data about Gypsy, Roma and Travellers could be improved. We have since published a [Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller report](#), covering data availability and quality, and a summary of key statistics for these populations. The Ethnicity Facts and Figures website has [63 datasets](#) that provide information on Gypsy, Roma or Irish Traveller populations; largely covering demographic information or educational attainment.

Throughout the pandemic the Race Disparity Unit supported me in cross-government work on COVID-19 ethnic disparities, delivering a range of research and [quarterly reports](#) addressing ethnic disparities in the health impacts of COVID-19. However, health data on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities was limited during the pandemic as the NHS data dictionary uses an ethnicity classification from the 2001 Census¹.

The reports included the following recommendations to improve the recording of ethnicity:

Departments and other agencies should publish a statement on GOV.UK outlining their plans to move their data collections to the Government Statistical Service harmonised ethnicity data standard. Harmonisation is hugely important as it allows analysts to gain deeper insight and value from data. The Race Disparity Unit will work with departmental representatives from the Harmonisation Champions Network to further progress this, pending the new harmonised ethnicity standard being produced by the Government Statistical Service.

¹ Some insights were available by [combining 2011 Census data with health data and death registrations](#) or using other alternative methods.

Health data suppliers should publish a quarterly report on progress in improving the recording of ethnicity in health care records. This is part of a wider recommended programme of work providing new, up-to-date guidance on ethnicity coding for health service providers and GPs and covering how patients are asked for their ethnicity and how it is recorded in their health records; and which categories are used when people are asked for their ethnicity.

Our health data quality work has reaffirmed our commitment to improving harmonisation and I have recommended that the Department of Health and Social Care should continue to consider the set of interdependent Unified Information Standard for Protected Characteristics (UISPC) recommendations proposed by NHS England to improve the quality of ethnicity data coding. The Prime Minister accepted this and the other recommendations outlined throughout the quarterly reports.

Ethnicity is one of the priority topic areas that the harmonisation team in the Office for National Statistics will be focusing on in 2022. For ethnicity, the current harmonised standard includes a 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller' response option within the higher-level 'White' category for England and Wales. We encourage data collectors to use these detailed classifications wherever possible. It also includes a write-in response option for any other white background.

As set out in the Government Statistical Service Harmonisation Team's [workplan](#), they are now working with various stakeholders and user groups to further understand their needs in relation to ethnicity data, including the need for a separate response category for 'Roma'. Part of this work also includes collaborating with the Race Disparity Unit in Cabinet Office to understand and embed inclusive terminology in data collection related to various ethnic groups. They will be publishing the initial findings of this work in autumn 2022, with guidance on what question to use whilst this work is undertaken due to be published in the coming weeks. They will then be testing possible improvements and changes to the question design as needed in 2023; and aim to be open and honest about their work. Regular progress and updates to our harmonised standards will be provided through their workplan webpage.

The quality assurance work for Census 2021, which is currently underway, is the most comprehensive ever, using a wide range of alternative and complementary data sources. The aim is to release the first results for Census 2021 on the population of England and Wales in early summer 2022, and to publish all other main Census 2021 data within two years of the census. Further details can be found in their latest [release plans](#).

The results will give us the richest picture of society across England and Wales. Population estimates for the 'Gypsy and Irish Traveller' and 'Roma' populations will be published in phase one of the release. All Census 2021 data will be published with statistical commentary or analysis. The analysis will develop in complexity as we publish more data. Phase two of the data release will provide multivariate data which will allow us to consider factors such as education, health, housing, and employment for these communities.

In line with the commitments made in the December 2018 White Paper [“*Help Shape Our Future: The 2021 Census of Population and Housing in England and Wales*”](#), the Office for National Statistics plan to produce additional bespoke analysis for the ‘Gypsy and Irish Traveller’ and ‘Roma’ populations. They will be analysed as two separate ethnic groups. As part of developing these analysis plans, they have been engaging with Gypsy and Irish Traveller and Roma community organisations, as well as other government and expert users, to better understand the data and analysis needs and priorities.

Taking forward the [Inclusive Data Taskforce recommendations](#), the Office for National Statistics has recently conducted qualitative research into the personal experiences of Gypsies and Travellers in England and Wales. In-depth and life history interviews and focus groups were conducted with individuals identifying as Gypsy and Traveller, and with members of local and central government. The Office for National Statistics is currently analysing the findings of this research which are planned for publication in July 2022. The findings should contribute evidence towards understanding the unique experiences of Gypsy and Traveller community members, including around access to homes, education, healthcare and justice, cultural identity, and experiences of discrimination linked to ethnicity.

4. Why have the Government and local authorities failed to provide sufficient authorised sites for Gypsies and Travellers, including permanent sites and negotiated stopping sites?

The Government is clear that local planning authorities are responsible for assessing the need for traveller accommodation and then plan to meet that need through their development plan, in the same way that they plan for all forms of housing.

In March 2022, the Government announced the £10 million Traveller Site Fund, which local authorities which can use for the provision of new sites for the travelling community (this includes permanent, transit sites and temporary stopping places) or the renovation of existing sites. This is in addition to the £11.5bn funding available for new sites through the Affordable Housing Programme (2021-26).

5. Will the Government urgently address the vast disparities in life expectancy among GRT communities as part of Mission Seven of the Levelling Up agenda?

The Government is committed to tackling the disparities in health outcomes and that is why we created an Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. The Levelling Up White Paper sets a mission to narrow the gap in Healthy Life Expectancy between local areas where it is highest and lowest by 2030 and increase Healthy Life Expectancy by 5 years by 2035.

We have committed to publishing a Health Disparities White Paper which will allow us to go further to address our mission. This Health Disparities White Paper will set out action to reduce the gap in health outcomes between different places and communities across the country, so that people’s backgrounds do not dictate their prospects for a healthy life.

6. What more can the Government and local authorities do to ensure that authorised sites have sufficient digital provision to enable their users to access online public services?

The National Planning Policy Framework says advanced, high quality and reliable communications infrastructure is essential for economic growth and social well-being. Planning policies and decisions should support the expansion of electronic communications networks, including next generation mobile technology (such as 5G) and full fibre broadband connections. Policies should set out how high-quality digital infrastructure, providing access to services from a range of providers, is expected to be delivered and upgraded over time; and should prioritise full fibre connections to existing and new developments (as these connections will, in almost all cases, provide the optimum solution).

Permanent sites and Transit sites should be developed and/or refurbished in accordance with existing planning policies, with particular regard made to Wi-Fi services for both site managers and site residents (Wi-Fi should at the least be available in community buildings).

For those unable or unwilling to own a device with internet access, public libraries play an important role in supporting digital inclusion. Around 2900 public libraries in England provide a trusted network of accessible locations with staff, volunteers, free and funded Wi-Fi, public computers, and assisted digital access to a wide range of digital services.

7. What more can the Government and local authorities do to ensure that providers of public services are supported to tailor the delivery of services to the needs of GRT communities?

The Government does not believe that the allocation, provision or quality of goods and services should ever be determined on the criteria of race, ethnicity or cultural tradition – to do so would risk violating our anti-discrimination legislation, the Equality Act. Service providers instead should focus on creating solution which are as universal as possible and do not stigmatise specific groups when trying to provide them with support.

8. Mission Five of the Levelling Up White Paper aims by 2030 for 90 per cent of all primary school children in England to have achieved the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, with the percentage of children meeting the expected standard in the worst performing areas improving by a third. What will the Government and local authorities do to ensure that GRT children are not left part of the remaining 10 per cent? How will the Government work with GRT communities to overcome the barriers that prevent GRT children receiving a full education?

The Department for Education do not design education policy to target certain groups of pupils based on ethnicity, but instead we are focused on improving outcomes for all children.

We will do this by ensuring:

- An excellent teacher for every child, including delivering world-class training and professional development at every stage of their career.
- High standards of curriculum, attendance and behaviour by creating the conditions in which great teaching flourishes: ensuring every child has access to an ambitious and stretching curriculum; supporting school leaders to establish safe and secure schools; and driving attendance back to pre-pandemic levels, recognising the protective, educational and wellbeing benefits to face-to-face education.
- Targeted support for every child who needs it. We pledge to parents that children who are behind in maths or English will receive evidence-based targeted support, such as tutoring, to help them make progress. Over a million tuition courses have started since 2020, and six million will be delivered by 2024. We will support schools to accurately assess pupil progress, identify need and improve the use of evidence-based interventions. We will work with the sector and with parents to support schools to communicate pupil progress and targeted support effectively to parents in a way that best supports children who are struggling to get back on track.
- A stronger and fairer school system that works for every child, encouraging the growth of strong trusts as the collaborative structure most suited to supporting high quality teaching. All organisations in the school system will have a clearly defined role, so parents know who to turn to in every situation, and local authorities will play a key part of realising this vision. We will build on the brilliance of our best school trusts that show that geography, demography and background need be no barrier to academic achievement.

We will continue to push for equal access to an education of the highest standard for all pupils.

To improve GRT pupils' attendance, the Department for Education has a comprehensive attendance strategy that has been implemented since the beginning of this academic year for all pupils to ensure that absence is minimised. They are continuing to monitor closely absence levels and trends.

Local authorities should understand their statutory responsibilities to all children equally apply to children from a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller background. It is important that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families who are educating their children at home are treated in the same way as any other families in that position. When a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller family with children of school age move into an area the Local Authority should ensure the educational requirements of the child are met.

Local authorities have a duty to make arrangements to find out so far as possible whether home educated children are receiving suitable full-time education. This assessment may differ from child to child, as there is no prescribed definition of what constitutes 'suitable' education and parents are free to educate their child by whatever method they consider most appropriate and effective.

Local authorities have a right to request evidence of the education provision, but parents have no obligation to provide that evidence nor to inform the local authority that they have elected to home educate. However, a lack of evidence will entitle the local authority if it cannot be satisfied a suitable education is being provided and may make arrangements to ensure that child receives a suitable education through means of the School Attendance Order process.

The Government intends to legislate that each local authority in England have a duty to maintain Children Not in School registers, and to provide support to home-educating families where they request it. Parents will have a duty to provide information for those registers. These measures were introduced to Parliament in May 2022 and will help local authorities identify children missing education and make more effective use of resources in assisting those who need it most.

We are strengthening the support available to pupils with poor attendance and have launched a new pilot programme to improve the quality of school attendance data to help make sure no child needlessly misses out on education.

Finally, the Department for Education runs a GRT stakeholder group, chaired by Baroness Whitaker, which meets regularly (meets termly, with additional ad hoc meetings as required). This provides opportunity to hear about the experiences and concerns in GRT communities. Members of the group include Traveller Movement, Friends, Families & Travellers, Advisory Council for the Education of Romany and other Traveller, and Roma Support Group.

9. What consideration will the Government give to piloting new agreements between local authorities and GRT communities as part of its 'Community Covenant' approach?

The UK Government have committed in the Levelling Up White paper to pilot new models for community partnership that can help make local power a reality. One model we are seeking to test is Community Covenants. These would be agreements between councils, public bodies and the communities they serve, which will include Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, seeking to harness the energy, know-how and assets of local communities.

10. What more can Government and local authorities do to encourage GRT communities to co-design public services?

We routinely engage with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller voices to understand their views of public services. Effective delivery of public services must involve service users and others involved in service delivery. The Civil Service Policy Profession Standards require that officials developing new policies and public services involve key stakeholders in the policy development process.

Once again, thank you for taking the time to write to the Department on these very important matters and I hope you find the response helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Paul Scully', with a stylized flourish at the end.

PAUL SCULLY MP