



HOUSE OF LORDS

Public Services Committee

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The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations
Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

Cc Baroness Scott of Bybrook, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities), and The Rt Hon Lucy Frazer MP, Minister of State (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities)

Dear Michael,

Access to public services for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities

As you know, we wrote to you on 17 May 2022¹ to raise our concerns about access to public services for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. The then-Minister of State Paul Scully MP responded to us on 12 July 2022², and we are responding today to follow up some issues we believe were not satisfactorily addressed within that letter.

Our letter of May 2022 noted vast disparities in life expectancy among Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities, and as part of action on Mission Seven of the Levelling Up agenda, called for urgent action to address them. We asked which departments were involved in tackling the inequalities, and how work was coordinated but the Minister's answer was brief and disappointingly general.

1. Please detail how work to address disparities in outcomes and life expectancy for GRT communities, which would clearly engage multiple departments, is led and coordinated.

We were seriously concerned by the Minister's answer to our question seven.

We were not proposing a breach of equality law, in fact the opposite. The Minister wrote: "The Government does not believe that the allocation, provision, or quality of goods 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 solutions which are as universal as possible and do not stigmatise specific groups when trying to provide them with support."

¹ Letter dated 17 May 2022 from Baroness Armstrong to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/22245/documents/164768/default/>

² Letter dated 12 July 2022 from Paul Scully MP, Minister of State at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/23156/documents/169407/default/>

We think that, on reflection, you would want to alter that language.

Under section 29 of the Equality Act, a service provider must not discriminate against a person requiring a service because of a protected characteristic, including race and ethnic origin. Certain GRT communities have been recognised as distinct ethnic groups and therefore protected from discrimination under the Act³. The Public Sector Equality Duty enshrined in section 149 of the Act places public authorities under enhanced duties both to “eliminate discrimination” which is prohibited under the Act, and to “advance equality of opportunity between persons who share protected characteristics and those who do not”. One example of these duties being carried out would be to provide access to Romanes language interpreting services since language barriers are one of several specific challenges for GRT communities in accessing public services.

The Committee is seriously concerned at the implication that supporting communities to access services would risk violating the Equality Act, and are sure you would like to correct that.

2. How can the Government ensure that the duties outlined in the Equalities Act are exercised in relation to Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities?
3. What further steps can the Government and local authorities take to meet the needs of people from GRT groups (where these are different from the needs of other people) in accessing public services?

With regards to housing, we are grateful for the information you shared on the Traveller Site Fund, for which £10 million capital funding is available to support local authorities in building new transit and permanent traveller sites, to refurbish existing sites, or to provide temporary stopping places and facilities for travellers. We note that applications for this funding closed in June 2022 but that information on funding allocations has not yet been made available.

4. Please provide an update on the anticipated outcomes of this funding, including an estimate of how many people from GRT communities this will benefit, and in what form.

Many public services are available, and being delivered, online. This will become increasingly the case. We considered this matter in our first report, *A critical juncture for public services: lessons from COVID-19*.⁴ We noted many benefits, but also risks, of applying advances in digital technology to public services, particularly for groups with limited access to digital devices, or with low digital literacy. We were very concerned that delivery of public services online should be applied intelligently and should never exclude people. We concluded that the Government should put a particular focus on “improving digital access and skills for those parts of the population that are at risk of digital exclusion”.

In our May letter to you, we highlighted that GRT communities are at risk of digital exclusion, because they face specific difficulties in accessing online public services. We quoted Mihai Călin Bica, Campaigning and Policy Worker at the Roma Support Group, who told us that: “about 20 per cent of us have access to equipment, such as smartphones, tablets or laptops.”

³ Equality Act 2010, [section 29](#)

⁴ Public Services Committee, [A critical juncture for public services: lessons from COVID-19](#) (1st Report, Session 2019-21, HL167)

In relation to this, we note your expectation that Wi-Fi should at the least be available in community buildings created through the Traveller Site Fund. The Site design standards set out in the prospectus for the Traveller Site Fund refer to Wi-Fi only in terms of site management, and Wi-Fi provision does not appear to be a requirement for funding.⁵

5. Please can you clarify how you will ensure that sites developed using the Traveller Site Fund will ensure the availability of Wi-Fi and other digital infrastructure, particularly in the light of increased online delivery of public services, including education?

We referred in our letter to consistently poorer educational outcomes for children and young people from a GRT background compared with other groups. We are grateful for the Minister's detailed answer outlining steps to address educational inequalities, and note the funding for targeted educational support.

6. Please provide an update on the anticipated outcomes of the £1.4 million in targeted educational funding, including an estimate of how many people from GRT communities this will benefit, and in what form.

We note that more than 14,000 GRT pupils qualify for free school meals. In an informal visit to a site, it was made clear to our Chair that some people in Gypsy communities do not, on principle, claim benefits for which they may be eligible. This means that children do not receive free school meals because eligibility for them depends on claiming certain benefits. This also means that schools do not receive the pupil premium associated with free school meals.

7. Has any consideration been given to alternative methods of assessing eligibility for free school meals?

We mentioned in our letter the need to improve the available data on Gypsy, Roma, Traveller communities, and in particular the disaggregated data on each of the peoples that fall under this term. We note that the data Quality Improvement Plan included a commitment for the Race Disparity Unit to maintain a harmonised approach to data collection about GRT communities, and that the Ethnicity harmonised standard is currently under development.⁶

We note the Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller ethnicity summary, which discusses data quality and availability for these populations. This summary states that:

"In the UK, it is common in data collections to differentiate between:

- *Gypsies (including English Gypsies, Scottish Gypsies or Travellers, Welsh Gypsies and other Romany people)*
- *Irish Travellers (who have specific Irish roots)*
- *Roma, understood to be more recent migrants from Central and Eastern Europe"*⁷

⁵ Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 'Traveller Site Fund 2022/23: prospectus' (updated 19 May 2022): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/traveller-site-fund-202223-prospectus/traveller-site-fund-202223-prospectus> [accessed 13 January 2022]

⁶ Government Analysis Function, 'Ethnicity harmonised standard': <https://analysisfunction.civilservice.gov.uk/policy-store/ethnicity-harmonised-standard/> [accessed 11 January 2023]

⁷ Gov.uk, 'Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller ethnicity summary' (29 March 2022): <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/summaries/gypsy-roma-irish-traveller> [accessed 11 January 2023]

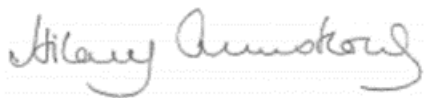
The letter dated July 2022 refers to work on the census analysis which will analyse ‘Gypsy and Irish Traveller’ as a single group, although Roma communities are analysed as a separate group.

Given the concern about health disparities between GRT and settled communities, it is of particular importance that data is available and usable by the NHS. We understand that there have been ongoing discussions around including reference to GRT communities within the NHS Data Dictionary, which provides a reference point for information standards within the NHS. In 2019, the Women and Equalities committee recommended that “Gypsy, Irish Traveller and Roma categories should be added to the NHS data dictionary as a matter of urgency.”⁸

8. Please can you provide an update on the development of the ethnicity harmonised standard, and when you expect this work to be completed?
9. Has any consideration been given to further disaggregating the group ‘Gypsy and Irish Traveller’ in data collection, including for the next census? Please provide details of any relevant consultation.
10. What assessment have you made of whether information on GRT communities should be included within the NHS Data Dictionary?

We would be grateful for a response to this letter by 13 February 2023.

Yours sincerely,



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

⁸ Women and Equalities Committee, [Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities](#) (Seventh Report, Session 2017-19, HC 360) para 49