



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top
House of Lords
London
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Lee Rowley MP
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28 March 2023

Dear Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top,

Thank you for your letter of 26 January to the Secretary of State about access to public services for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. I am responding as this matter falls within my ministerial responsibilities; please accept my apologies for the delay in responding.

Thank you for raising the further question from the Committee; as you will be aware, not all the issues raised are owned by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, so Departmental officials have consulted with other government departments where necessary, and this response follows in the order in which the questions were raised.

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.

The Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities leads on Gypsy Roma and Traveller (GRT) policy and liaises with other government departments on what they are doing to address disparities in outcomes for the GRT communities.

With regards to health, disparities exist across a wide variety of conditions from cancer to mental health, and we know this contributes to this variation in life expectancy.

The Government recently announced plans to deliver a Major Conditions Strategy. The Strategy will tackle the conditions that contribute most to the burden of disease in England, including cancer, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory diseases, dementia, mental health, and musculoskeletal conditions. The Strategy will be about joining up work to support the increasing number of people living with multiple conditions. The Department of Health and Social Care will be developing the Strategy in consultation with NHS England and colleagues across government and will be seeking input from a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society, industry and clinicians. The Strategy will benefit certain groups that suffer the most from the six conditions we are focussing on. This includes vulnerable groups who have significant and consistent disparities in health outcomes including for example, people in GRT communities.

Additionally, the Government recently announced that it will be publishing a new suicide prevention strategy this year. We are continuing to work closely with a range of partners across the suicide prevention sector to consider factors linked to suicide, and GRT communities are being considered as part of this.

In addition to this work on outcomes specifically, the Government continues to deliver on its wider commitments to tackle ethnic disparities. In March 2022, the [Inclusive Britain](#) government response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report was published, setting out a groundbreaking action plan to tackle negative ethnic disparities, promote unity and build a fairer Britain for all. It included what we intend to do to give everybody, from every community, in every corner of the UK, the opportunity to succeed.

The 'Inclusive Britain' action plan contains 74 actions spanning education, crime and policing, health and the workplace and is built on three overarching aims:

- *TRUST AND FAIRNESS* - building a stronger sense of trust and fairness in our institutions and confidence in British meritocracy;
- *OPPORTUNITY AND AGENCY* - promoting equality of opportunity, encouraging aspiration and empowering individuals; and
- *INCLUSION* - encouraging and instilling a sense of belonging to a multi-ethnic UK which celebrates its differences while embracing the values which unite us all.

Work is well underway to deliver these actions and the Minister for Women and Equalities has committed to reporting back to Parliament on progress after 12 months.

2. How can the Government ensure that the duties outlined in the Equalities Act are exercised in relation to Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities?

The Government is committed to making Britain a fairer place for all, and for delivering equality of opportunity for everyone.

Irish Gypsies and Travellers, Romany Gypsies and Scottish Gypsies and Travellers have all been established by case law as 'distinct ethnic groups' protected by the UK's Race Relations Act 1976, the provisions of which were subsequently consolidated in the Equality Act 2010.

The Equality Act's Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) places a proactive duty on public bodies, and those exercising public functions, to consider the potential effects of key decisions on groups with protected characteristics. This approach ensures that public sector bodies consider the full range of equality issues relating to key decisions or policies. In exercising their functions, public sector bodies are required to:

- have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; and
- foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

Under the PSED, public bodies should consider whether their policies, action plans and initiatives are assessed, planned and implemented in a strategic way that takes account of cultural differences and issues which certain groups may experience. Failure to do so can lead to action being taken against the public authority, such as the Secretary of State, by way of Judicial Review or as part of any statutory planning review with respect to planning decisions. The Equality and Human Rights Commission also has a range of enforcement powers, including the power to challenge policies or practice.

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?

Local authorities are best placed to understand the needs of their residents, including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities; and shape local provisions to meet those needs. For example, Central Bedfordshire has three part time Traveller Education Liaison Officers who support families and schools in terms of the completion of admission, school transport and other application forms where there are literacy issues. They attend relevant meetings with schools to support and advocate for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents. These also support in areas such as Children Missing Education and Elective Home Education.

Hillingdon has support workers from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities who provide support to people from their communities. Over time, families have sought help more and more from these people as trust has grown.

Bradford has an Access Team which supports families, including GRT families, who might be struggling to access services such as education.

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

The fund will support local authorities to provide additional transit and permanent sites and temporary stopping places to meet the accommodation needs of travellers. The fund can also be used for the refurbishment of existing transit and permanent sites to improve the living conditions and environments for residents. Funding decision will be announced in due course.

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?

The Traveller Site Fund Prospectus dated 20 March 2022 contains further information on this matter. I have included a copy in this response

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.

The GRT Education Areas programme was a £1 million, one-year pilot programme announced in July 2021 by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. This funding was in addition to the £400,000 funding, announced in 2020, for catch-up tutoring for GRT children, where the project provided support on lost learning, one-to-one and expert guidance to help young people progress in education or find employment.

The £1 million funding was made available to Bradford, Central Bedfordshire, Essex, Hillingdon and Surrey local authorities, alongside Open Doors Education and Training organisation, where a wide range of targeted support was provided for parents and families with pre-school children, pupils in primary school and those transitioning to secondary school thereby reducing drop-out rates, young people not in education, employment or training, adults needing literacy support and teachers to improve their GRT cultural understanding and knowledge.

Through our engagement with partners and visits to schools we have been able to monitor progress, learn lessons and shared knowledge at local and national levels.

Reports from the programme have been positive, including opportunities for schools to offer more 1-1 teaching time to address gaps in learning, build better relationships with parents and improve confidence and trust.

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

Past analysis shows that take up of benefits-related free school meals among currently eligible pupils is approximately 89%. FSM are not mandatory, and parents may choose, for their own reasons, not to claim. The Department for Education aims to make parents aware of FSM via schools and make the claims process as easy as possible.

In order to ensure the process of assessing eligibility is quick and straightforward for schools and local authorities, the Department for Education provides an Eligibility Checking System. The Department has developed a model registration form to help schools encourage parents to sign up for free school meals. It has also provided 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.

8. Please can you provide an update on the development of the ethnicity harmonised standard, and when you expect this work to be completed?

In early spring 2023 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) will publish findings from their review of the current ethnicity harmonised standard. Harmonisation means making sure data are consistent, coherent, and comparable across the UK. Harmonisation allows analysts to gain deeper insight into a topic. It means that analysts can combine statistics from lots of different sources with greater confidence. Ethnicity harmonised standards provide a convenient solution to help with data collection. They help users directly to compare data collected and produced by different parts of government. This can save time and money. The review will report on research exercises such as an 'unmoderated card sort' and feedback from data collectors and data processors.

In late Spring 2023, the Office for National Statistics will also publish follow up research detailing the results of an ethnicity terminology project they have undertaken jointly with the Cabinet Office Equality Hub, together with findings from community engagement work and an interviewer survey. Following these publications, the Office of National Statistics plans to review the existing questions in the ethnicity harmonised standard, with the re-design of the questions beginning this summer and the updated self-complete version of the ethnicity questions available by the end of 2023. Self-complete surveys are surveys completed directly by the respondent, for example online surveys or paper questionnaires. Further information on our work is in our [Harmonisation Winter 2022 update](#).

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.

The Office for National Statistics is currently reviewing if there will be a Census data collection in 2031.

The research for the [Census 2021 tick-box prioritisation](#) is still the most up to date piece of work the Office for National Statistics has when looking at the user need for separate tick boxes for Gypsy and Irish Traveller.

In Census 2021, the number of people who specified “Gypsy or Irish Traveller” within one of the high-level ethnic groups included 63,443 people (0.1%) who identified their ethnic group as “White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller”.

The Office for National Statistics plans to produce bespoke analysis for ethnic groups identified as being of the highest user need in the Census [White Paper](#). This analysis will include publications focusing on Gypsy and Irish Traveller, Roma, Sikh, Jewish and Somali groups. Further information on the planned analysis can be located in their [Ethnic group, national identity, language and religion analysis plans](#).

10. What assessment have you made of whether information on GRT communities should be included within the NHS Data Dictionary?

The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) has not made a formal assessment of the information collected within the NHS England data dictionary.

The NHS Data Model and Dictionary reflect the latest approved Information Standard for the data submission of ethnicity categories in the National Health Service. This is derived from the Office for National Statistics’ categories in 2001, which do not currently include Gypsy/Romany Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller groupings. DHSC remain committed to assessing how data can be improved in the future to support their work.

I trust the above answers are helpful in providing further information regarding your questions.

Yours sincerely,



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