



# Education Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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From Robert Halfon MP, Chair

Robin Walker MP  
Minister for School Standards  
Department for Education  
20 Great Smith Street  
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## **Educational challenges of children and young people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds**

Dear Robin,

As you will be aware, our Committee has a particular focus on disadvantaged children and left behind groups. As part of our work on this we recently held an inquiry on the educational challenges of children and young people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds. We are writing to follow up on several issues raised, and to highlight the Committee's observations and reflections on the issues that arose during the evidence sessions.

### ***Early Intervention***

One of the main points raised within our inquiry was the importance of engaging children early, via early years settings as this will help build a stronger relationship between Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and the education system. Published data on the development goals for 4–5-year-olds shows Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller pupils are least likely to meet the expected standard. On average, 71% of 4-5-year-olds met the expected standard in development in the 2018-2019 school year, compared with 34% of Gypsy/Roma pupils and 39% of Irish Traveller pupils.

You spoke of the benefits of family hubs and the role outreach services can have to encourage parents from these communities to engage with early years settings. 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.

## ***Parental Engagement***

Witnesses also emphasised the importance of parental engagement. This included adult education programmes to support parents with low literacy levels engage with the education system. When giving evidence to the Committee, you referenced the challenges of intergenerational literacy. You stated that despite there being available funding within the adult education budget to support adult literacy, this funding is not effectively engaging with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. We appreciate your recognition that this is an important area for the Department to focus on. However, we would like to receive more information on how the Government plans to allocate the available funding to have a real impact upon parents from these communities with low literacy levels. An update on how the Government plans to engage with parents from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities within the next six months would also be welcome.

Witnesses spoke of the importance of schools employing role models from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities to help build trust amongst parents and support them in better understanding the education system. We suggest schools with a large percentage of pupils from a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller background seek to employ role models from these communities, to build better relationships with the parents, and strengthen their engagement with schools. We took evidence from primary school teaching assistants from the Roma community in Ipswich and were informed of the important work they do in engaging with Roma families and supporting them in understanding the education system. Therefore, 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 could also actively engage with parents in the community, and train them to act as mentors to other parents and caregivers. We believe this would also help to build trust and ensure better parental engagement.

## ***Educational Attainment***

Our sessions examined the low educational attainment of children and young people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds and we were extremely concerned by the evidence we heard. On average, children and young people from these communities have the lowest educational attainment. Gypsy/Roma pupils are almost three years behind White British pupils at GCSE level, and Gypsy/Roma and Irish Traveller pupils have the lowest Attainment 8 score out of all ethnicities with 22.7 and 30.7 out of 90 respectively. The average Attainment 8 score for pupils in England is 50.9 out of 90. The Government must take concrete action to improve educational outcomes for these children.

Witnesses raised further concerns regarding the low numbers of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils receiving pupil premium funding despite being eligible. They believe this is because of a cultural belief in self-sufficiency. The Committee recommends that an uptake of the pupil premium would be one of the solutions needed to better support disadvantaged children. When speaking to the Committee, you recognised the cultural

stigma which acts as an obstacle in receiving additional support. You also stated that this was an area the Department needs to review to provide the right support to schools. Therefore, 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.

The importance of attendance in increasing a pupil's educational attainment was highlighted by witnesses. 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.

Witnesses also highlighted the importance of schools supporting Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities to better understand the wider career opportunities available through further and higher education. Therefore, we recommend schools should provide targeted career guidance for these communities, to better inform them of the career opportunities available through engagement with education.

### ***Identifying incidents of bullying and racism***

Throughout our inquiry, we heard that school must be a supportive and collaborative place in which Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils feel safe. However, witnesses repeatedly raised incidents of bullying and racism faced by children, from both their peers and teachers. Many ethnic minority groups experience bullying, including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils however, there are no official statistics which break these cases down by ethnicity. We believe that, to understand the scale of the issue and the impact it has upon educational outcomes, local authorities should work with schools to better understand the extent of the problem faced by these, and other communities, that may be affected by bullying or racism.

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.

### ***Exclusions***

The inquiry also examined permanent and temporary exclusions which are higher amongst Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils. In the 2018 to 2019 school year, Gypsy/Roma pupils had 21.26% temporary exclusions whilst Irish Traveller pupils had 14.63%; the overall temporary exclusions amongst all pupils was 5.36%. For permanent exclusions, Gypsy/Roma pupils had 0.39% whilst Irish Traveller pupils had 0.27%; the overall permanent exclusions was 0.10%.

We share our witnesses' concern over these higher exclusion rates and the lack of implementation of the recommendations set within the Timpson Review of School Exclusion. 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.

### ***Elective Home Education***

Finally, the inquiry received evidence on the relatively high rate of withdrawal from mainstream education to Elective Home Education of children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Witnesses were worried that parents did not have appropriate support to provide their children with a suitable home education. Our report [Strengthening Home Education](#) highlighted the importance of a statutory register, and we appreciate your agreement on the importance of this register. Our report also highlighted that the voices of the home education community in public debates often does not include families with lower levels of literacy or education. The Traveller Movement told us that the home educated community:

*tends to be led by people from White and/or middle class backgrounds. Consequently, the voices of people with lower levels of literacy or education tend not to feature in public debates. This is an unfortunate omission which obfuscates the lived realities of people with less social, political, or educational capital. This in turn prevents a proper analysis of the structural issues and barriers that lead to more marginalised people opting for elective home education.*<sup>1</sup>

As you stated to the Committee, the register will not only provide accurate records of children outside of school, but it will also give local authorities the powers to provide parents with support when it is needed. In the Government's response to this letter, we would like clarity on when this register will be introduced by the Government

We would be grateful to receive a response to this letter by 22 April which can then be considered by the Committee.

Yours sincerely,



**Robert Halfon MP**  
**Chair of the Education Committee**

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<sup>1</sup> The Traveller Movement ([HED0380](#)), Strengthening Home Education, HC 84, Session 2021-22