**BRITISH-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY - Committee D (Environment & Social)**

**“Travellers, Gypsies and Roma: access to public services and community relations”**

UK Government response (education)

The Committee’s report highlights many of the complex and interwoven factors that influence the educational attainment for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) pupils, including socio-economic factors, levels of parental education, inter-generational experiences of education, and fear of bullying or prejudice. Despite this complexity, we know that schools can have a transformative effect on the lives of GRT pupils. We welcome the examples that the Committee draws on that show the role schools can play in engaging GRT parents and the wider community in their children’s education; rising aspirations and, importantly, improving attendance of GRT pupils.

It is unacceptable for any group of children to underachieve in education. Every child, whatever their background, circumstances or ethnicity deserves the chance to progress in school, and in later life. That ambition underpins all the Government’s reforms to education in England, which aim to deliver a high-quality school-led, self-improving system where schools and local authorities have the freedom and flexibility to meet the needs of their local communities. This means school leaders and teachers can respond directly to the needs of their pupil cohort. That system is underpinned by strong accountability arrangements, including re-focussed Ofsted inspections and new school accountability measures, which will ensure that schools are held to account for the progress and attainment of all their pupils.

The Government is making every effort to ensure we have a fair funding system that ensures schools and local authorities have the resources and flexibility to provide the support needed by their communities. Furthermore, we are targeting funding at those pupils with higher needs, including through the pupil premium that allocates additional funding of over £2.5 billion per year to schools with disadvantaged pupils.

These reforms focus on improving education for all pupils, but should significantly benefit those GRT pupils who are falling behind. We recognise, however, that any interventions need to be well tailored to the needs of particular GRT communities, and the specific issues they face, and this is why our approach to tackling underachievement of GRT pupils in English schools is to focus on encouraging local action to meet individual GRT pupils’ requirements.

To support schools, local authorities and parents to meet their responsibilities to improve and support the education of GRT pupils, the Government funded two local authorities to trial a “virtual headteacher” for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils, with responsibility for supporting schools to promote better outcomes for this group. The effective practice identified from their work was circulated to every local authority in England in October 2014. The Department has also produced case studies and continues to work with its GRT Education Stakeholder Group to encourage local action. We will share the Committee’s recommendations with the Group shortly.

Recommendation responses

1. **We recognise the value of “one-stop-shop” models where schools also serve as community hubs for, potentially among other aims, building good relationships with Travellers and Gypsies. We recommend that model to areas with high concentrations of Travellers and Gypsies although we realise that current financial restraints are likely to delay implementation.**
2. **Widening support for adult Travellers and Gypsies to help them develop literacy and numeracy skills so that they can support their children through school ought to be provided through lifelong learning projects.**

The Department for Education recognises the value of parental engagement in education. All schools should ensure that they engage with parents to encourage them to have high aspirations for their children and to engage in their education.

It is for local areas to decide how best to configure and fund their services to help schools do this, as they are best placed to know the needs of their communities.

There are examples of schools working with GRT parents, where necessary, to help them gain the confidence and skills needed to give their children basic help with their homework. The Department has produced short case studies of schools that have been successful in improving the attendance and attainment of GRT pupils, which are available at: [www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/gypsy-roma-and-traveller-pupils-supporting-access-to-education](http://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/gypsy-roma-and-traveller-pupils-supporting-access-to-education).

1. **The Irish and UK Governments and administrations should invest in building and maintaining appropriate mechanisms for transferring schools records, particularly to support Traveller and Gypsy children.**

It is, of course, important that schools and parents work closely together when a pupil transfers from one school to another to ensure as smooth a transition as possible and minimise disruption to the pupil’s education. This would include schools ensuring appropriate transfer of any records held on the pupil, their prior attainment and educational needs, and parents ensuring their pupil’s current and new school are aware of their plans.

In England, there is a well-established system for transferring a pupil’s records between schools in such circumstances, with clear statutory requirements on schools. If a pupil moves from a school in England to another school in England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland the pupil’s common transfer file and educational record must be passed to the new school. Information should be sent to the new school either through the ‘school-to-school’ secure file transfer system or another secure network that can be accessed only by the local authority, the governing body or teacher. In line with the Education (Pupil Information) Regulations (2005) all information must be transferred within 15 days of any request from the pupil’s new school. Further information can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/key-stage-1-assessment-and-reporting-arrangements-ara/keeping-and-maintaining-records--6>.

1. **Ensuring that Traveller and Gypsy children can access education services with the support that they require to fulfil their potential is a basic human right. Governments should make funding available to adequately support these children.**

As part of our plan for education, the Department is making every effort to ensure schools and local authorities have the resources and flexibility to provide the support needed by their communities. Funding in the English schools system is allocated based on pupil need, whether that is a special educational need, language need or socio-economic background.

The pupil premium, for example, provides additional funding to schools in England based on the number of disadvantaged pupils. The proportions on GRT pupils attracting the pupil premium are far higher than other ethnic groups. For example, in 2012/13, 84% of Traveller of an Irish Heritage and 65% of Gypsy/Roma pupils at the end of Key Stage 2 met the criteria for the pupil premium, compared to 31% of all pupils. We believe that schools and local authorities are best placed to decide how to allocate this funding to serve the needs of their communities.

1. **We recommend that the other Governments in our jurisdiction seek or provide funding for research and development of support resources for teachers.**

The Department has published summaries of the research in this area setting out the issues faced by GRT pupils and the available evidence on how to improve their attainment. This is available at [www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-the-outcomes-for-gypsy-roma-and-traveller-pupils-final-report](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-the-outcomes-for-gypsy-roma-and-traveller-pupils-final-report).

The Department also continues to work with its Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Education Stakeholder Group, chaired by Baroness Whitaker, to spread best practice to improve provision and pupils’ outcomes, including case studies and the outcomes of the Department for Education funded ‘virtual head teacher’ trial.

1. **Adequate language support in schools is vital if Roma children are to be able to access education services. We recommend that the Governments and administrations assess the adequacy of current provisions and keep a watching brief on it.**

It is vital that all pupils are able to access a full curriculum and, where needed, are supported to improve their English language ability. For any child for whom English is an additional language (EAL), the extent and nature of the support they need, will vary accordingly. Schools themselves are, therefore, best placed to determine how to tailor provision to meet the specific needs of their pupils, including Roma pupils.

Local authorities in England may allocate a proportion of their funding to schools on the basis of the number of pupils in each school who have EAL, and who have been in the school system for a maximum of three years. Local authorities, in agreement with their schools forum, have the freedom to set the pupil rate for this, based on local circumstances. Schools may also use pupil premium funding to support disadvantaged pupils.

Ofsted also recently published a report on the education of GRT pupils, making recommendations to Government, local authorities and schools. This report is available at: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/ensuring-roma-children-achieve-in-education](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ensuring-roma-children-achieve-in-education).

The Department is now taking action such as: considering how the funding system could be more responsive to in year changes in pupil numbers and allowing schools more flexibility over how they record pupils’ ethnicity, to encourage accurate ascription. The report also highlighted case studies about effective practice in supporting Roma pupils who are newly arrived to England and have limited English language ability; Ofsted expect to issue further case studies in this area in due course.

1. **It would be most desirable to see greater media coverage of Travellers, Gypsies and Roma who do well in education so that they can be role models and inspire the next generation.**

We would very much welcome more positive media coverage of the GRT community.

1. **We recommend that the English, Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh Governments and administrations explore better data-collection mechanisms covering achievement, retention and progression of Traveller, Gypsy and Roma children.**

The Department for Education continues to publish a range of comprehensive performance data, including on absence, exclusions and school attainment in English schools broken down by ethnicity. The data highlights the performance of GRT pupils, ensuring that any underperformance by this group of pupils is evident and informs national policy, and importantly, informs school and local authority action to address that underperformance. The Department will continue to closely monitor data about GRT pupils, working with the GRT Education Stakeholder Group, chaired by Baroness Whitaker, to encourage local action to improve the education of GRT pupils.

Those professionals who work with GRT communities have told us of their ongoing concern that official data on GRT pupils is limited by low ethnicity ascription. The reasons for this are complex, and it is ultimately for individual parents to decide how they register their child’s ethnicity. The Department, however, is taking steps to encourage more accurate ascription of pupil ethnicity. From January 2016, schools will be able to record separate data on Gypsy and Roma pupils, instead of the current joint category. We anticipate that this change will encourage Roma parents to declare their child’s ethnicity accurately, which in turn will help schools to tailor their support for these pupils.