



HOUSE OF LORDS

PUBLIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

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17 May 2022

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: Lord Greenhalgh, Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP, Secretary of State for Education

Dear Michael,

On 2 February, the House of Lords Public Services Committee took evidence from representatives and advocates of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities about those communities' access to public services. The evidence that we heard was stark and shocking. In this letter we make recommendations to, and ask questions of, the Government to address the issues raised.

We have written separately to Professor Sir Chris Whitty and Dr Jeanelle de Gruchy about the much shorter average life expectancy of members of the GRT community. We have copied you into that letter.

We heard that:

1. Very little has been done by the Government to address inequalities exposed by the Race Disparity Audit in 2017 and the Women and Equalities Committee in 2019.
2. A lack of suitable accommodation is the major issue facing GRT communities. Around 10,000 Gypsies and Travellers currently live roadside in England because of a shortage of stopping sites, many of whom struggle to access basic amenities. Their lack of access is at the root of the health inequalities that affect these communities.
3. Life expectancy for Gypsy and Traveller people is reported to be 10 to 25 years less than the general population.
4. While suitable accommodation is the first step to help GRT communities to access public services, their subsequent experience of those services is often marred by discrimination and negative experiences such as bullying in schools.

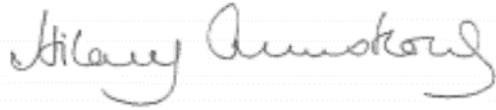
5. Relations between GRT communities, local authorities and local non-GRT communities are typically characterised by mistrust, or by a complete lack of communication. Positive examples do exist, but these are largely the result of hard work by GRT representative groups.

The compelling evidence that we heard from our witnesses, which we outline in the second part of this letter, leads us to conclude that **as part of Mission Seven of the Levelling Up agenda, the Government should urgently address the vast disparities in life expectancy among GRT communities.**

In addition, we ask the following questions:

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’?**
2. **Which departments are involved in tackling these inequalities, and how do they coordinate work across Government?**
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?**
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?**
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?**
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?**
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?**
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?**
9. **What consideration will the Government give to piloting new agreements between local authorities and GRT communities as part of its ‘Community Covenant’ approach?**
10. **What more can Government and local authorities do to encourage GRT communities to co-design public services?**

We look forward to receiving your response as soon as possible.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Hilary Armstrong", enclosed in a dashed rectangular box.

Yours sincerely,

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

Summary of evidence

Past Government action

The Race Disparity Audit in 2017 found deep inequalities, especially in education outcomes, for people from GRT communities.¹ In 2019, the Government launched a national strategy to tackle entrenched inequality and improve the lives of GRT people.² In the same year, the Women and Equalities Committee³ found significant inequalities in access to education and healthcare for these communities. Both the Race Disparity Audit and the Women and Equalities Committee found that data about GRT communities was lacking.

We heard from expert witnesses and witnesses with lived experience that little progress had been made to tackle these inequalities. Abbie Kirkby, from Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT), told us: “We know about the stark inequalities experienced by the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, but we need the action to address those inequalities. The premise underpinning the Race Disparity Audit was to explain or change race disparities, and I am afraid that we are not quite seeing enough of a move to changing the situation.”

It is unclear what the Government is now doing to address the inequalities faced by GRT communities.

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

Accommodation

Our witnesses told us that a lack of suitable sites was the major issue facing Gypsies and Travellers. They argued that the provision of better sites would enable better access to public services such as health and education. The 2015 planning policy for traveller sites established that local planning authorities are responsible for providing appropriate sites for Gypsies and Travellers; however research by FFT found that in 2020, only eight out of 68 local authorities had identified a five-year supply of specific deliverable sites.

Billy Welch, Head Gypsy, told us that more sites were just “not happening” and recommended that “it should be made compulsory for local authorities to provide pitches for roughly the number of Gypsies and Travellers in their area, like it is to build houses.” Allison Hulmes, Co-founder of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Social Work Association, told us: “most of the

¹ Cabinet Office, [Race Disparity Audit: summary findings from the ethnicity facts and figures website](#), October 2017

² Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [New national strategy to tackle Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Inequalities](#), 6 June 2019

³ Women and Equalities Committee, [Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities](#) (Seventh Report, Session 2017-19, HC 360)

sites in England were built during the period of the statutory duty between 1968 and 1994 ... Local authorities do not have the appetite to build sites. We have spoken about local prejudice against having more sites built, which is a massive barrier to addressing that issue.” Well-organised, private sites with established relations with providers of public services and the police can sometimes assuage scepticism among local non-GRT communities.

At the time of writing, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill had almost completed its Parliamentary stages. The Bill would introduce penalties for people who reside, or intend to reside, on an unauthorised encampment. The Joint Committee on Human Rights, in its scrutiny of the Bill, stated that “a chronic lack of authorised sites” means that many in GRT communities feel that they have no choice but to live on unauthorised encampments.⁴ The Joint Committee concluded that “to criminalise unauthorised encampments without providing sufficient authorised sites would be contrary to the Government’s obligation under Article 8 the European Convention on Human Rights, to facilitate the gypsy way of life.”

The Levelling Up White Paper pledges to build more housing in England, including more affordable social housing, and to launch a new drive on housing quality to “make sure homes are fit for the twenty-first century.” Around three quarters of Gypsies and Travellers in England and Wales live in bricks and mortar accommodation, but the remaining quarter live in a caravan or other mobile structures. We were told that those people who did not have a permanent address were “struggling”. Witnesses such as Ivy Manning, Community Engagement Officer at FFT, told us that negotiated stopping sites were not a new innovation but were necessary for those living a nomadic lifestyle. Josie O’Driscoll said: “we have been nomadic for thousands of years. If people want to be nomadic, they should be allowed to. There should be ‘negotiated stopping’, which...[has] been tried and tested in Leeds. It has shown that they can save money by doing it. Have these places for people who want to be nomadic.” Bill Lloyd, Gypsy and Traveller Representative for the Appleby Horse Fair, said that ‘negotiated stopping’ “has a track record of solving problems”.

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?

Life expectancy

We discussed with our witnesses “Mission Seven” of the Levelling Up the United Kingdom white paper that your department published recently. The aim of that “mission” is to narrow the gap in healthy life expectancy by 2030. But while the white paper mentions the Romans three times, there is no mention anywhere of Roma or Romany communities; nor does it consider Travellers. This is an enormous missed opportunity. The causes of the appalling and unacceptable disparity in life expectancy among GRT communities should be investigated as a matter of urgency.

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?

⁴ Joint Committee on Human Rights, [Legislative scrutiny: Police, Crime, Sentencing And Courts Bill \(part 4\): the criminalisation of unauthorised encampments](#) (Fourth Report, Session 2021-22, HC 478, HL Paper 37)

Access to, and experience of, public services

The appropriate provision of sites is the first step in addressing unequal access to, and experience of, public services. However, we heard of further inequalities. Firstly, we heard for Roma people that there were linguistic and digital barriers to accessing public services. Mihai Călin Bica, Campaigning and Policy Worker at the Roma Support Group, told us that “none of the public services in the UK provide Romanes language interpreting services, which is the language that we Roma speak.”

Mihai also told us that Roma “face huge difficulties using the online environment ... [only] about 20 per cent of us have access to equipment, such as smartphones, tablets or laptops.” The COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased online public service provision, which can exclude those who without internet access. Mihai Călin Bica said: “the financial support available [during the pandemic] was mostly available through online means...which has made it almost impossible for people from our communities to access the services and support they needed during those times.” We would add that, as with all digital service provision, there should be some consideration given to ensuring that users have the digital skills to access them.

GRT people are also less likely than other groups to access offline public services. Dr Dan Allen, Deputy Head of Department, Faculty of Health, Psychology and Social Care, Manchester Metropolitan University, discussed how “we need to think about how we can bridge that divide and make sure that our services are accessible. The Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are not hard to reach; our services are hard to reach. That gives us a way to start thinking about how, working backwards, we can make our services accessible to the people who are most in need.” Victoria Hamnett, a social worker from Rochdale Borough Council who has examined the overrepresentation of GRT children in child protection, reported that “historically, we know that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities often have fear and shame in accessing the support, from quite early on, of children and welfare services ... professionals often do not have the insight and the perception from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families that the experiences they have had previously are often very negative. How they engage other ethnicities may be different from how we engage Gypsies, Roma and Travellers at that really early level.”

- 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?**
- 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?**

Education plays a central role in social inclusion and well-being, but children from the GRT communities historically have been left behind. The House of Commons Education Committee in June 2021 reported that children from GRT families experienced consistently poorer education outcomes compared with other groups throughout their educational journey.⁵

⁵ Education Committee, [The forgotten: how White working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it](#) (First Report, Session 2021-22, HC 85)

The barriers to GRT children attending education should cause Government deep concern. Witnesses described barriers including discrimination and bullying, a lack of suitable job opportunities after education, and cultural factors. Mihai Călin Bica told us that “just a few days ago, I spoke with a 12-year-old girl who said that she does not want to go to school anymore because other kids are picking on her and her teachers do not want to listen to her. She said, ‘I just don’t want to go back there anymore’. This somehow needs to be addressed, through Ofsted or other means. Teachers need to change their attitudes about children.” He said that negative experiences of education were intergenerational, and that many Roma parents did not trust teachers or schools. Billy Welch argued that “another reason why we take the children out of schools, other than the bullying, is that we have realised over the centuries that you can have as good an education as you want, but we are not going to get a job with the settled community, not one that is worth doing anyway. They just point-blank refuse to employ us, whether we are Roma, Gypsy or Irish Traveller. They will not give us a job.”

- 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?**

Community relations

The Levelling Up White Paper states that the Government will pilot a set of ‘Community Covenant’ approaches, with new agreements between councils, public bodies and communities to improve public services. Most of our witnesses reported the negative views of GRT communities towards public services, and vice versa. Josie O’Driscoll told us that there were lots of places in the UK that “have no engagement whatever with local authorities”. Ivy Manning said that “We need to look at public bodies such as the police, because there is no confidence in or trust between the police and Gypsy, Traveller and Roma people. For example, if you are on a local authority site, the police will turn up to visit one resident but will raid everyone onsite, when we are not all related. It is like going into a street of houses, knocking on everyone’s door and raiding everyone for one specific person. There is no trust there.”

Despite an overall negative picture, we heard examples of positive engagement between local authorities and GRT communities. Billy Welch told us about his initiative to go into schools and educate children about Gypsy culture. He said “I show the schools how we used to live. Then I take them into a modern caravan and a modern outside kitchen, and show them how we live today, which is basically the same but in a more modern, 21st-century way. That is also very educational for the teachers and the councils.” Mihai Călin Bica provided examples of good engagement with public services: “[Local authorities] try as much as possible to avoid any assumptions when they work and engage with us. They also try to treat everyone as individuals. They like to listen and honour the people who speak and share their experience with them. They give people a lot of time and try to simplify the process of that engagement as much as possible. Simply, these sorts of values and concepts made a huge difference in their

case and in our own case. This community development approach could have a significant impact.”

We heard that positive engagement often relied on GRT representative groups. Josie O’Driscoll and Bill Lloyd told us that involving GRT communities in the design of public services was “non-existent in places where there are no Gypsy, Roma or Traveller organisations”. Mihai Călin Bica agreed: “some local authorities are making efforts, but that it mostly connected to where we have a presence of Roma organisations”. We heard that more effective engagement between public services and GRT communities would improve inequalities of access.

- 9. What consideration will the Government give to piloting new agreements between local authorities and GRT communities as part of its ‘Community Covenant’ approach?**
- 10. What more can Government and local authorities do to encourage GRT communities to co-design public services?**