

GTR School Exclusions Roundtable

29th June 2015

The Children's Commissioner and The Traveller Movement

Hosted by Kate Green MP



“When the education system is fit to include our children, it will be fit to include all children.”

-Lisa Smith, English Gypsy and Targeted Youth Worker

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Chair and speakers

Kate Green (Chair)

Labour MP

This event was made possible through Kate's willingness to introduce TM to the Children's Commissioner and kind offer to host a joint event.

Anne Longfield OBE

Children's Commissioner for England

Abi Angus

Education and Advocacy Officer, The Traveller Movement

Lisa Smith

Community member, Targeted Youth Worker, Traveller education

Brian Foster

GTR education professional, TM trustee

Andy Mellor

Head teacher, St Nicholas School

Antony Hughes

Children's Commissioner and Director of Inclusion and Learning Service, Sheffield Council

Representative from the Department for Education

Vicky Stewart answered questions on behalf of the DfE

What was explored?

Kate Green opened the event by expressing how pleased she was to introduce Anne Longfield to the Traveller Movement, enabling the start of a positive and hopefully fruitful relationship.

Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner for England began by stating her commitment to working with stakeholders and the community to take actions forward following the event. Anne spoke about previous research on school exclusions that had been carried out by the Office for the Children's Commissioner published in 2012 and 2013. This research highlighted the disproportionate number of GTR pupils receiving exclusions in comparison to the whole school population. When concluding, Anne said that she would be willing to share best practice on her website and in the regular newsletter the Office produces.

Next to speak was **Abi Angus**, Education and Advocacy Officer at the Traveller Movement. Abi presented the main findings from research conducted by the Traveller Movement into GTR school exclusions across England between 2009 and 2014. The research used DfE statistics to track GTR exclusions across each Local Authority area in the country, showing trends in numbers and geographical areas across the previous five years.

Lisa Smith delivered a passionate and highly informed speech describing her experiences of school both as a Gypsy child attending school and as a professional working in GTR education support. Lisa shared her belief that education system ignores the positive experiences of GTR young people and does not appreciate Gypsy, Roma and Traveller cultures. Issues of inclusion are being ignored due to the financial pressures on schools, when Traveller Education is an optional and expensive option there is less pressure on schools to 'buy in' this service, leaving young people unsupported. Lisa has observed a trend where schools encourage parents to take Elective Home Education, absolving the school of responsibility for pupils deemed as 'difficult'. Families often feel that they have few options, particularly when pupils are being bullied and home education can be a flight mechanism. Pupil Premium distribution, Lisa said, remains a key issue. She recommended that the Department for Education should specifically include Gypsy Roma and Traveller children as a group who automatically qualify for Pupil Premium.

Brian Foster followed on from Lisa, speaking about a clash of cultures between schools, families and government. Previously Traveller Education Services were able to mediate between these cultures however, cuts to services have left a hole in support, resulting in a tendency to blame Traveller pupils for the high number of exclusions. Schools often speak in jargon to each other and parents are disempowered in that process, struggling to understand the language and the processes themselves. Brian pointed out that often primary schools are successful in ensuring GTR parents and pupils are supported and included in the life of the school, however secondary schools are different environments. Concluding, Brian said there needed to be more flexibility in secondary schools' towards Traveller children coupled with greater leadership from the Government.

Andy Mellor is the headteacher of St Nicholas in Blackpool, a primary school with a high number of Traveller pupils. He spoke about the successes of both the pupils and the school in ensuring that it was an inclusive environment with high expectations of all children. Part of ensuring that the school is a safe place meant addressing every single incidence of bullying, guaranteeing that pupils understand that racism, regardless of its form, is not tolerated. Over the past 14 years only 1.8% of the schools exclusions have been Traveller children; Andy sees exclusions as counter-productive as he wants to see pupils in school. The school have invested in options to improve the attendance of the Traveller children. They spend £5,000 a year on a bus which will travel to the sites to pick up the children if they are unable to get there themselves. Andy added that there is a perverse incentive in the school targets around

attendance, which essentially encourages schools to exclude Traveller children to improve their overall attendance rate. Andy said it is vital the schools are mixed, and are as inclusive as they possibly can be. It is also integral that strong relationships are built with the community. Constant communication between local schools on best practice and experience is the best tool to ensure a wider model of inclusion.

Next to speak was **Antony Hughes**, who holds the position of Children's Commissioner and Director of Inclusion and Learning Service for Sheffield Council. Traveller Movement's research highlighted the concerning number of exclusions given to GTR pupils in Sheffield, Antony was able to share with us what is being done by the local authority to tackle this issue. As part of his remit, Antony supports schools in Sheffield to hold workshops with different groups within the community to address any issues and share models of good practice. Strategies to reduce exclusions for Roma pupils have been a particular priority in Sheffield, work has been done to meet with Roma families and find out from them how schools can support pupils better.

The **Department for Education** was represented by Vicky Stewart from the Disadvantage and Attainment Unit. She stated the intention of the DfE to work on strategies to improve outcomes for GTR pupils and an eagerness to hear suggestions. Lisa Smith proposed that making GTR pupils automatically eligible for pupil premium would give schools extra funding to use, this will be discussed internally within the department. Vicky told participants that the DfE are currently working on assembling an expert panel regarding education and outcomes for GTR pupils that will replace the stakeholder group. The panel will be kept small, those to be invited to form the group will be contacted shortly.

Baroness Whitaker was in attendance and spoke briefly to participants from the floor, urging that more work is needed to look at the whole context of low attainment for GTR pupils, not just school exclusions.

Q&A session

Issues and comments raised during the Q&A session:

- Is it possible to be judged an outstanding school by Ofsted if maintaining high levels of exclusions?
- Is there a way to monitor the number of illegal exclusions being given? Report by The Children's Commissioner "They Never Give Up On You" in 2013 uncovered illegal exclusions, but audience members said that this is still widespread. Some workers report a huge rise in unofficial exclusions.
- Elective Home Education (EHE) is used by some schools as an alternative to permanent exclusions. Anecdotes were shared of letters written by schools on behalf of families and given to parents for signing with very little choice. These cases need to be recorded as it has happened across the country. Once a family elects to home educate they are given little intervention or resources.
- Few Traveller Education Services have the capacity to work holistically following cuts, most are commissioned to work wider geographically and for larger number of service users. Academies have to 'buy in' TES, which means many do not opt to purchase the service.
- Throughout school exclusion appeals process families are frequently treated poorly and often feel judged by governors/panel. The process should be more straightforward and support for parents easier to access. Traveller Movement currently support parents in appealing school exclusions.
- Persistent Disruptive Behaviour is used as an excuse because it is a wide net for the school to use without giving a particular reason.
- It is highly important to celebrate diversity within schools. Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month is a great opportunity and there are some good resources available.
- The UN are currently collecting responses for the UK's Universal Periodic Review. The UK will be declaring what action they have taken to ensure greater equality. A few organisations are responding, with failures to adopt strategies and policies to be highlighted.
- 'Don't get mad, litigate!' When there is failure to treat people equally there are often frameworks to formally challenge. It is important that community members have knowledge of and access to these tools.
- GTR education is a bigger issue than school exclusions, however exclusions are recorded and provide a good indicator of the inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils.

Recommendations and actions

- A national community-led network should be created, providing models of good practice, research and tools to tackle inequalities, supported and funded by the Department for Education. This could include a website highlighting resources and tools as well as a regular newsletter.
- Pupil Premium system to automatically include children from groups who have low educational outcomes and not only use eligibility for benefits as a measure. This will provide schools with extra funding to use in targeted support for children who may currently be excluded from Pupil Premium.
- The Department for Education are currently in the process of introducing an expert panel looking at GTR education issues.
- The Traveller Movement will be putting together research based on case studies looking at good practice when including GTR parents in the life of a school.
- The Children's Commissioner has stated her commitment to working alongside the Traveller Movement in the future, with potential for joint research.

Evaluation and comments

This was a positive roundtable discussion with good participation from attendees. According to the feedback received, the event was a success.

The event overall was rated 'very good' by more than half of the participants that provided their feedback and 'good' by all other responding participants.

The less positive feedback was in relation to time spent queuing for security checks before entering the Houses of Parliament. Whilst TM unfortunately cannot fast track guests we will make sure we warn participants of future events about potential delays.

Some participants also felt that the event covered issues that have been raised many times previously and expressed that unless policy makers are willing to make changes, GTR pupils are likely to remain at an educational disadvantage.

This event marked the start of a potentially positive relationship with the Office of the Children's Commissioner, we look forward to seeing how change can be affected through working together in the future.

The Traveller Movement would like to thank Kate Green for hosting and the Children's Commissioner Office for their role in organising this event as well as all participants for their contributions.

"Excellent event- great speakers, much needed."

"Good range of contributors. Clear and relevant input from each."

"The event was excellent as it did take the issues to parliament"

"Fab to get this raised so highly and push for the positive action for the way forward."

"We look forward to seeing any minutes with action points from the meeting and work collaboratively with TM and other organisations to make positive policy changes for the community."

"We're stronger together, as today's excellent event demonstrates."

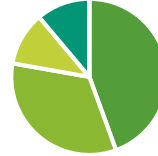
Feedback from participants

Overall, how satisfied were you with the quality of this event?



■ VERY GOOD ■ GOOD

How would you rate the pre-event information and administration?



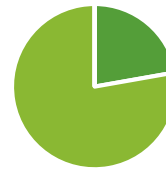
■ VERY GOOD ■ GOOD ■ AVERAGE ■ POOR

How would you rate the staff facilitation of the event?



■ VERY GOOD ■ GOOD

How would you rate the venue?



■ VERY GOOD ■ GOOD

Will you use the information gained from this event?



■ YES ■ NOT SURE

Were you listened to and respected?



■ YES ■ NOT SURE

Would you recommend an event with TM to other colleagues or practitioners?



■ YES

The Traveller Movement

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