

the Traveller Movement



Conference Report 2021

Demanding Social Justice for our Young People

About the Traveller Movement

The Traveller Movement (TM) is a leading national charity committed to the fulfillment of Human Rights for ethnic minority Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) people. The Traveller Movement's mission is to develop a platform and voice for Travellers, working in solidarity with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities to achieve equality through self-determination and proactive participation in influencing and shaping policy.

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THE TRAVELLER MOVEMENT WOULD LIKE TO THANK:

- Pauline Anderson OBE for chairing the conference
- Martin Docherty-Hughes MP for delivering the keynote address
- Our panel speakers: Daniel Kebede, Michael Collins, Greg Sproston, Millie Cooper, Declan O’Driscoll, Sue McAllister CB, Zahra Bei, George Barrow and Adam Mooney
- All of our attendees

INTRODUCTION

A decade of austerity and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to an erosion of civil and political liberties in the UK, which has disproportionately affected Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people. The political decisions taken in response to the pandemic, and in particular the implementation of the Coronavirus Act by the UK government, has further hampered the human rights and dignities of already marginalised communities. Without an urgent course correction from the Government these communities, including Gypsy Roma and Traveller young people, will be left behind.

The current political climate has pitted cultural and social groups against each other, diminished opportunities for young people, and short-changed priority sectors of public policy in favour of the business sector, and it the Government seems determined to ignore the growing race and class inequalities that thrive in the UK.

The Government has additionally failed to properly invest in young people and their future; whether that be their education, the employability, or their housing prospects. This particularly effects Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people, and the underfunding of priority policy areas such education catch-up tuition programmes has further hampered a minority which is already marginalised. Backwards steps on public policy are being taken at a time when civil liberties, including the right to assemble and protest, are under threat.

The Traveller Movement's 2021 annual conference explored these complex, interconnected issues and considered what the future will hold for GRT young people; with a particular focus on inequalities in education, gender, employment, economic inclusion, political & civic participation, and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The keynote address was delivered by Martin Docherty-Hughes, MP for West Dunbartonshire and co-Chair of the APPG on Gypsies, Travellers and Roma. Martin opened the conference with a stark reminder of the current political situation. He spoke of the unambiguous impact of climate change on all groups in society, and highlighted the calamitous impact of COVID-19 and the way in which the UK Government's policy response has exacerbated existing societal inequalities and further disadvantaged GRT communities.

Martin spoke of the stark educational disadvantages endured by GRT children and young people – highlighting unacceptable disproportionality in exclusion rates and attainment – whilst also stressing that these disadvantages had also been further compounded by disruption to education. But he also remarked on the opportunities of remote and blended learning, and praised the work of Open Doors Education and Training and other organisations in delivering remote catch up learning projects for young GRT people.

Anticipating the contributions of many participants throughout the day, Martin spoke the National Strategy to reduce GRT inequalities, first announced in 2019. He criticised the lack of progress the Government have made on the strategy but highlighted important concessions the APPG had won from the Government in the past year, including councils adopting negotiated stopping policies and provision of amenities for nomadic communities.

Martin updated conference on some of the important work the Scottish Government have undertaken in support of GRT communities including £2m funding – with a further £20m allocated – for renovation and development of existing and new sites for GRT communities.

The Police, Crime, Courts, and Sentencing Bill was identified as a draconian piece of legislation amounting to a direct attack on GRT communities. He explained that the legislation is a de facto proscription of minorities, runs contrary to the advice of police forces, and reflects centuries of bigotry and discrimination.

Martin finished on a note of hope. He remarked upon the growing number of social movements. He noted the fact that organisations and individuals both within GRT communities and across wider civil society are engaged in civic based community action, and said the conference was the perfect time to reflect on how this could be done in collaboration.

PANEL 1 - PARTICIPATION: NAVIGATING THE STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL BARRIERS FOR CIVIC, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC INCLUSION FOR GYPSY ROMA & TRAVELLER COMMUNITIES

GREG SPROSTON - POLICY & CAMPAIGNS MANAGER, THE TRAVELLER MOVEMENT

DANIEL KEBEDE - PRESIDENT, NATIONAL EDUCATION UNION

MILLIE COOPER – COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT OFFICER, THE TRAVELLER MOVEMENT

MICHAEL COLLINS – NATIONAL YOUTH OFFICER, IRISH TRAVELLER MOVEMENT

The first panel took a bird's eye view of the myriad barriers which exclude young GRT people across society and make living rewarding, fulfilling lives more difficult. Contributions were varied, and speakers considered political disenfranchisement, economic inclusion, and alienation in education.

Greg spoke on the Elections Bill, and stated that provisions requiring voter ID for UK elections amounted to de-facto voter suppression and a restriction of the franchise. He highlighted the fact that the Government had been unable or unwilling to produce any of its own impact assessments assessing the manner in which legislation would affect minority communities, but pointed to a wide body of research indicating negative impacts. This included a reference to TM's own report 'Access Denied'. The report was based on interviews with GRT people, who unanimously agreed that the proposed measures created additional barriers for democratic participation. Greg linked the Elections Bill to the Police, Crime, Courts and Sentencing Bill, and argued that the Government is actively pursuing authoritarian policy and the rolling back of fundamental human and civil rights.

Daniel opened with an expression of support and solidarity with GRT communities, and said the NEU wanted to use its weight and influence to challenge the systemic discrimination GRT people face in society. Daniel highlighted that that one in five GRT young people leave school due to bullying, and two thirds of those had experienced discrimination at the hands of teachers or other school staff. He remarked on much higher exclusion rates of GRT pupils, and noted GRT pupils were much more likely to be victims of illegal off-rolling. He noted that these negative experiences at school had lifelong impacts, and are a particular strong predictor of engagement with the criminal justice system and of economic exclusion. He stated that his union was committed to working with Traveller Movement and GRT communities to tackle discrimination in schools, and fully supported the Traveller Movement's campaign for a mandatory requirement to record and report instances of racism in schools.

Michael began by acknowledging a reduction in participation in campaigns and organising from the grassroots community itself in Ireland, especially with regards to young people. He said that his work, and the strategy developed in Ireland, was geared towards combating that. He remarked that it was important to campaign for improvements to e.g. education, housing, employment – but it was equally important to work to improve capacity, empowerment and self-advocacy within communities.

With regards to the Irish national strategy, he explained that the work brought together the 40 Traveller organisations working across Ireland, representatives from each Government department, and young GRT people aged 14-18, for roundtable discussion to allow young people to articulate their needs and experiences directly to policymakers. The second strand of the project was to develop active citizenship and leadership capacity amongst young Travellers; this includes practical development on presentation and debating skills, and raising confidence. Michael spoke of the strong grassroots representation and self-determination of LGBT and migrant voices in the Irish youth sector, and said this should be a model for young GRT communities.

Millie introduced some findings from forthcoming peer-led Traveller Movement research exploring barriers to employment, education, and training for young GRT people. Millie explained how the research process was community driven, with peer researchers meeting to discuss the content of surveys and interviews, and the themes they wanted to see reflected in the report. Millie highlighted community peer researchers as a particular strength of the project; researchers were able not only to analyse data and findings from surveys, but relate these to their own lived experiences as young GRT people.

The key themes in this research were an unfolding mental health crisis, rooted in discrimination and feelings of low self-worth driven by a systemic lack of opportunities; a failing school system not adequately supporting or responding to the needs of GRT pupils especially in early years; and a lack of access to sustainable development of life skills. Millie outlined some of the specific report recommendations which would address these issues, and explained that the recommendations were all identified by young GRT people.

The full report, Roads to Success, will be published by the Traveller Movement in February 2022.

PANEL 2 – THE SCHOOLS TO PRISON PIPELINE: ASSESSING THE ROLE OF SCHOOL EXCLUSIONS AS AN OBSTACLE TO EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND AS AN ENTRY POINT INTO THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN GYPSY, ROMA & TRAVELLER COMMUNITIES

ADAM MOONEY – PROGRAMME LEAD FOR OVERREPRESENTED CHILDREN, YOUTH JUSTICE BOARD

GEORGE BARROW – SENIOR POLICY OFFICIAL FOR PROBATION AND RACE DISPARITY, MINISTRY OF JUSTICE

ZAHRA BEI – FOUNDER, NO MORE EXCLUSIONS

DECLAN O'DRISCOLL – EDUCATION POLICY OFFICER, THE TRAVELLER MOVEMENT

SUE MCALLISTER CB – PRISON AND PROBATION OMBUDSMAN

George and **Adam** delivered a joint presentation to update conference on the Ministry of Justice and Youth Justice Board's work on racial disproportionality in the youth justice estate. They noted that systemic and institutional prejudices results in some children not receiving equal treatment, and stated it is unacceptable that some children are more likely to be criminalised because of their

ethnic background. “Influencing the youth justice system to treat children fairly and reduce overrepresentation” was highlighted as a specific strategic goal; with work on disproportionality toolkits for practitioners and development of a diversion-of-overrepresented children concept as identified as specific outputs.

Zahra spoke of her experience as a former teacher in a Pupil Referral Unit, and noted how many of her former students had had some level engagement with the criminal justice system as well as highlighting that 61% of excluded children will go to prison at some point in their lives. She outlined the comprehensive body of research showing the strong correlations between exclusions and mental ill health, youth offending, and diminished life chances as a result of poor educational attainment; and reinforced the severe ethnic disproportionality in exclusion figures in English schools. Zahra argued that campaigners, charities, and advocacy groups should not pursue a reduction in exclusions, but the abolition of school exclusions entirely.

Declan highlighted a range of practices, both formal and informal, which can influence the school-to-prison pipeline. He explained the practice of off-rolling in which disadvantaged or low achieving pupils are removed from school rolls ahead of exams. Whilst the practice is not universally unlawful, Declan noted that OFSTED does not consider there to be any acceptable circumstances in which off-rolling should be used. Despite this, off-rolling remains a common practice in both primary and secondary schools. Declan also spoke the frequency of GRT parents taking children out of school either as a response to – or anticipation of – their children being the victims of racism and discrimination. Drawing a parallel with hostile working environments and constructive dismissal, he argued that this practice should be termed “constructive exclusion”. In closing, Declan provided interim data from a pilot project being undertaken between TM, OFSTED, and Derby City Council which showed an unprecedented reduction in temporary and permanent exclusions.

A full report on this pilot project will be published by TM in 2022.

Sue spoke about her experience as the Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service from 2012-16. She outlined the challenges in developing meaningful engagement with GRT people in prison and the barriers preventing GRT people from universal access to meaningful activities within the prison estate. She noted that a lack access to meaningful activities, and the associated impact on mental health, was a particularly pronounced challenge in the context of COVID-19 protocols in prisons, with people in prison often confined to their cells for up to 23 hours a day. Sue identified difficulties with effective and reliable ethnic monitoring in prisons and highlighted the need for greater understanding of PSED duties, more efficient monitoring and recording of discrimination related complaints, and more robust systems of data collection of protected and personal characteristics as particular priorities.

CONFERENCE WORKSHOPS

The four conference workshops addressed different thematic areas: criminal justice reform, economic inclusion, gender based shaming, and political/civic engagement. Each workshop was chaired, with speakers given 5 minutes each for contributions followed by a period of discussion to produce a set of draft recommendations.

WORKSHOP 1: IF NOT NOW, WHEN? SECURING POSITIVE CHANGE IN THE CJS

Chair: **Greg Sproston**

Speakers: **Christian Johnson (Open Doors Education and Training)**

Pippa Goodfellow (Alliance for Youth Justice)

Louise King (Just for Kids Law)

Caroline Liggins (Hodge, Jones, and Allen Solicitors)

The workshop considered the many different factors, including but not limited to poor educational attainment and material deprivation, which act as strong predictors of engagement with the criminal justice system. Speakers noted that examples of good practice regarding diverting young people away from the CJS exist across the UK, but conceded this positive change was too reliant on strong individual leaders. Participants largely agreed with the statement “We know what changes are required within the CJS”, and the workshop noted that the strategic priority for organisations working in the CJS should be a renewed focus on implementing recommendations from e.g. the Lammy Review, the Farmer Review. Etc.

WORKSHOP 2: ‘THE SHAME GAME’: GENDER, HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND ABUSE IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

Chair: **Aoife Delaney**

Speakers: **Christina Kerrigan (Traveller Movement)**

Gwen Taylor (Glitch)

Sophie Maskell (Office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner)

Molly Gillespie (Coventry Youth Association)

Participants spoke of the significant offline impacts of online abuse, and highlighted the disproportionate impact of online abuse on women, and particularly on minority women. The workshop considered the question “how can we end online gender-based abuse against GRT women and girls?”. Attendees agreed that both Government and Big tech needed to take more responsibility, with improved legislation and greater deployment of resources. The workshop noted that prevention is more effective than cure, and argued for a digital citizen education programme.

WORKSHOP 3: BUILDING THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

Chair: **David Smith**

Speakers: **Phil Reagan (Traveller Movement)**

Sally Carr (National Youth Agency)

Jenni Berlin (Traveller Movement)

Speakers outlined the severe disproportionality of NEET GRT young people, relative to the non-GRT population. Echoing panel discussions earlier in the day, participants highlighted the severe impact of both institutional racism as a factor in NEET figures for GRT populations; as well as a relative lack of visible GRT role models in e.g. business or academia. The workshop noted that adult or guardians often have capacity issues in helping their children navigate education or other opportunities, and supported the development of skills projects and schemes that were inclusive of parents; and strongly argued for significantly expanded self-employment and business development support for young people

WORKSHOP 4: ACCESS DENIED?

Chair: **Colin Clark**

Speakers: **Luke Smith (GRT Socialists)**

Ben Smoke (Huck Magazine)

Virgil Bitu (Drive2Survive)

Dave Aldwinkle (ACORN Renter's Union)

The workshop considered the barriers to accessing civil and political life faced by young GRT people. In common with other panels and workshops participants discussed the insidious impact of discrimination and racism. Participants considered the low levels of trust and faith in democratic and other state institutions amongst many GRT people. Speakers shared their own experience in campaigning in other areas, e.g. LGBT+ issues, tenants' rights, and migrant rights, and discussed specific models and types of campaigning, and how these could be utilised by GRT communities. Lastly, the workshop explored ways in which to develop and encourage self-empowerment, and the ability to self-advocate, amongst GRT communities.



The Traveller Movement
40 Jeffreys Road
Stockwell
London
SW4 6QX
Tel 020 7607 2002 | Fax 020 7607 2005

www.travellermovement.org.uk

 info@travellermovement.org.uk

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