



January 2022

## Call for Evidence

The future of post-16 qualifications

Romany Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) pupils are less likely to stay in education after the age of sixteen than pupils in any other ethnic group, with just 73% of Irish Traveller pupils and 66% of Gypsy and Roma pupils staying on in 2016/17 (The latest figures made available).<sup>1</sup> However, it is worth pointing out that this is for the pupils who manage to successfully remain in education until then and are likely to have a range of coping strategies. The higher numbers missing from education or moving to elective home education before the legal leaving age are not represented here which means that the real figure is likely to be much bleaker. It is also likely that many of the issues and challenges faced in schools by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils such as low teacher expectations, bullying and low prior attainment continue to be faced by these pupils.<sup>2</sup>

Forthcoming Traveller Movement research indicates the extent to which young Romany Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people feel excluded from or unable to access academic or vocational qualifications. The introduction of T-Levels, as well as some other legislative proposals in the Skills & Post-16 Education Bill, are theoretically a welcome development but they do little to tackle the structural barriers facing GRT people in education, employment, and training; which are overwhelmingly experienced earlier in the educational system.

### **Post-16 Qualifications – What do GRT Communities need?**

The Traveller Movement have recently completed, and are due to release in February, a peer led needs assessment study of young GRT people's experiences in education, training, and employment. A majority of the young people in the project expressed interest in further training but most did not either know how, and/or were missing the necessary prerequisite qualifications (see also<sup>3</sup>). Most young people had never had anyone in their families to take part in training/courses and therefore the idea seemed quite foreign to them. It was clear that these pathways or a 'culture' of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/after-education/destinations-of-school-pupils-after-key-stage-4-usually-aged-16-years/latest#by-ethnicit>

<sup>2</sup> Bhopal, K., 2011. 'This is a school, it's not a site': teachers' attitudes towards Gypsy and Traveller pupils in schools in England, UK. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(3), pp.465-483.

<sup>3</sup> The Traveller Movement (2021) *Gypsy, Roma and Traveller access to Further Education: 14-16 provision, vocational qualifications, apprenticeships and A Levels*.



accessing courses and training was missing for most of the Romany Gypsy, Roma, and Irish or Scottish Traveller young people we interviewed and surveyed:

*“I didn’t look for any training courses after I finished school, I didn’t know how to.” (Romany Gypsy girl, 17)*

When asked about the type of qualifications and training that would most benefit them, the answers varied from **functional maths and English to IT skills, business studies, trades, hair/beauty, fashion and cleaning**. The responses reflected the cultural preference for self-employment and the traditional gender roles many Romany Gypsy, Roma, and Irish or Scottish Traveller families still live by:

*“Definitely maths and English because you need them to be able to get onto courses. And we’re pretty good at most things to be honest, we’re good at finances and we’re good in most common sense stuff.” (Romany Gypsy woman, 24)*

In this context the development of T-Levels is welcome and reflects the priorities of young GRT people. However, the general entry requirements of 5 GCSES including English and Maths presents a significant barrier for young GRT people.<sup>4</sup> The Government should urgently take steps to drive educational attainment at level 2 as part of its National Strategy to reduce GRT inequalities. In addition, it should take steps to make level 3 qualifications available to those without level 2 qualifications which with inclusion of ‘foundation year’ equivalents.

### **The Landscape for Romany Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers**

Economic inactivity and exclusion from the labour market is rife with GRT communities; just 40.1% of GRT people aged 16-64 are employed, compared to a national average of 71%. The employment gap persists even when controlling for childhood deprivation and health inequalities, The 2017 Race Disparity Audit found pupils from GRT backgrounds have the lowest educational attainment of any ethnic group and are additionally more likely to be temporarily or permanently excluded, more likely to be absent, and less likely to stay in education post-16 than other groups.<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting the multidimensional disadvantage faced by GRT people, there are a multitude of factors which influence poor educational attainment which subsequently impact access to post-16 qualifications and training. One such factor that cannot be overstated is the impact of discrimination and bullying in educational settings. Previous Traveller Movement research indicates that 70% of

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<sup>4</sup> The Traveller Movement (2021) Gypsy, Roma and Traveller access to Further Education: 14-16 provision, vocational qualifications, apprenticeships and A Levels.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/after-education/destinations-of-school-pupils-after-key-stage-4-usually-aged-16-years/latest#by-ethnicity>



GRT people have experienced discrimination of some form in an educational setting, whilst 76% have hidden their ethnicity in an effort to avoid discrimination or prejudice. A 2016 Women & Equalities Committee report echoed this finding, noting that GRT people “face high levels of hostility and discrimination, with Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children particularly vulnerable to bullying in school”.

The Traveller Movement have recently completed, and are due to release in February, a peer led needs assessment study of young GRT people’s experiences in education, training, and employment. Whilst discrimination was not initially intended to be a primary focus of the research, community interviewees consistently returned to the impact of racism on their long-term educational attainment:

*“The effect is the feeling that you're not good enough and it stays with you for the rest of your life. ... I knew I was good at a lot of subjects but they would just assume that just because I was a Gypsy, I couldn't do it.” (Romany Gypsy woman, 23)*

### **Discrimination**

The discrimination experienced by GRT people has a direct impact on educational attainment. The persistently high rate of exclusions, often used as a first rather than a last resort for GRT pupils perceived as ‘difficult’ or ‘unruly’, creates significant additional pressures by limiting access to learning. Similarly, there is anecdotal evidence that high rates of absence amongst GRT communities may be partially explained as a defence mechanism against racism – with GRT people avoiding the places where they believe they will be victimised. The Traveller Movement conceptualises this process as “constructive exclusion” to draw a parallel with “constructive dismissal” in the workplace; in which an employee feels they have no choice but to leave employment as the result of a hostile working environment.

*“Parents feel quite vulnerable to send their children to school because they don't really know what's going to happen to them. And that's the reason behind why I think a lot of Gypsies and Travellers are not in school because their parents are quite scared for them.” (Irish Traveller girl, 17)*

Previous research has found that some GRT children are taken out of the school system by their parents by the end of primary school; with bullying and schools not taking children’s needs into account cited as factors. Educators – whether consciously or not - harbour often harbour beliefs or expectations that GRT children will at some point drop out of education. Regrettably this can lead to a negative-feedback loop in which some children or their families believe they are being ‘written off’, which in and of itself can drive a reluctance to engage substantively with schooling and education.

### **Varying Perceptions of Education**



Particularly in Romany Gypsy and Traveller communities, there is a strong cultural background of self-employment family owned business, and for many young GRT people there is an expectation to move into the family business following education. This may result in a disconnect in perceptions of the value of education. Young GRT people interviewed for TM research expressed a belief that the subjects taught, and skills developed, at secondary education did not sufficiently reflect the skills they required for their desired career or lifestyle.

*"[College/training should be] more accessible at a younger age. I think, if you want to get Travellers more involved in education, you got to kind of cater towards our lives as well. Because the way that the education system is now it doesn't really benefit Travellers and the life they want to live. So, you know, maybe providing that education sooner." (Romany Gypsy woman, 21)*

The perceived irrelevance of secondary education in particular was additionally cited by the Women and Equalities Committee as a factor for low secondary attendance amongst GRT pupils.

## Recommendations

- The Department for Education must drive behavioural change in schools, beginning with the implementation of a mandatory and uniform requirement for schools to monitor, record, and report instances of race/ethnicity-based bullying and discrimination; as is already the case for gender or disability-based bullying.
- Headteachers, teachers, and school staff should implement the National Education Union's framework for developing an anti-racist approach in their schools.
- Headteachers, teachers and school staff need to develop more comprehensive strategies for meaningful engagement with Gypsy, Roma, Traveller parents which take into account cultural norms and values as well as the structural barriers facing Gypsy Roma and Traveller people
- The Government should introduce plans, and provide funding, to ensure all NEET young people have access to Math and English functional skills training. This could be achieved by separate legislation, or by amending T Levels or other level 3 qualifications to ensure functional skills training can be undertaken alongside a level 3 qualification – as is already the case for Access to Higher Education Diplomas.
- Primary schools should partner with secondary schools or other youth provision organisations in order to provide introductory career guidance/education for Romany Gypsy, Roma, and Irish or Scottish Traveller pupils at the primary level. This would ensure that pupils who leave the education system early have still access some form of guidance.



- As part of either the Levelling up Strategy, or the forthcoming Employment Bill, the Government should introduce local youth employment skills boards; with the specific inclusion of minority groups
- The Government should earmark funding specifically for the development of self-employment skills, and training/education relating to self-employment on a parity with skills development for employment.
- Vocational Qualifications - Pupil entitlement funding should be made easily available to help pupils re-engage with the education system, particularly in the 14-16 and 19-25 age brackets where a gap seems to exist. Easy to access, designated routes back into education through re-engagement courses would better allow these pupils to access suitable academic and vocational qualifications that meet their needs. Furthermore, these pupils need access to study and learning support, and careers advice and counselling to ease the transition back into education and to increase retention and improve future employment opportunities.
- Traineeships and apprenticeships – Pupils who have not achieved Maths and English qualifications by the age of eighteen should be able to access additional funding and teaching/mentoring, as Maths and English qualifications are a prerequisite to further study and employment. There should be incentives for employers to take pupils with passes in vocational qualifications but not in Maths/English and provide them with additional on-the-job training to bring them up to speed.
- A Levels – Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils need to be adequately supported at GCSE level to ensure that they are able to obtain the necessary grades to progress to A Level qualifications. Additional funding should be made available to provide tutoring or mentoring for pupils from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds. This is especially important when considering the impact that missed education due to the COVID-19 pandemic will have on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils.