



Department for Education  
20 Great Smith Street  
Westminster  
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6 April 2020

**CC:** Nick Gibb MP; Michelle Donnelan MP; Vicky Ford MP; Baroness Berridge; Gillian Keegan MP; Children's Commissioner; Angela Raynor MP; Caroline Lucas MP; Baroness Sal Brinton; Baroness Janet Whitaker

***RE: Covid-19 and Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller school children***

Dear Right Hon. Gavin Williamson MP,

We are writing to raise our concerns that children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds will be especially disadvantaged in their educational attainment during the covid-19 pandemic. We are especially concerned at the lack of national policy pertaining to the educational needs of certain vulnerable groups, and we consider that without specific guidance these groups will further slip through the cracks.

Whilst schools have remained open for vulnerable children and the children of key workers, and rightly so, we fear that children from recognised disadvantaged backgrounds<sup>1</sup>, such as Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers (GRT), will completely miss out on their education in these few short months. This will put them further behind their peers, and could lead to many simply not returning to education, particularly those in Key Stages 3 and 4. We therefore urge the Department to implement a strategy aimed at ensuring GRT pupils have access to suitable materials but also to mobile data and, where required, to laptops and digital solutions which will then enable their learning to continue throughout this period.

**The specific issues**

We are concerned that Department's current guidance to schools<sup>2</sup> does not explicitly reference those with limited or no digital access. Additionally, due to a lack of clear national policy, home education provision and resources seem to vary from school to school. We are aware that most schools rely on online learning platforms for parents to access work for children to do at home. However, this will present a challenge for

<sup>1</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/360/report-summary.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-school-closures/guidance-for-schools-about-temporarily-closing>

many GRT children who face digital exclusion, and who may not have access to a laptop or broadband at home. They might also have the additional disadvantage of having parents with language barriers, literacy issues and/or poor access to educational resources.

Specifically these issues include:

1. Literacy, attainment, exclusions and outcomes - GRT pupils are already disadvantaged in their educational attainment. They have the highest rates of school exclusion, the poorest attainment and are the least likely to leave school with formal qualifications. They should be considered for extra tuition or support at this time.
2. Grade predictions - this will have a negative impact on GRT as teachers already have low expectations of these pupils. This will affect their final grades, which are likely to be under-predicted. Additionally, many children are not likely to return to school, as they will have missed significant time off from formal education.
3. Caring duties - many families may be more vulnerable to the virus because of financial insecurity and impracticability of isolation. Children may take caring roles if adults fall ill. This will also affect their ability to learn.
4. Digital exclusion - this affects many families. GRT parents, whose own educational experiences may have been inadequate, will find it difficult to support their children learning at home (particularly without online access).

#### **Actions that needs to be taken:**

- As recommended by the IPPR<sup>3</sup>, the Department for Education (DfE) should work with schools and telecommunications technology providers to get broadband installed and devices loaned or donated to those children without them.
- Where this isn't possible, schools should be posting out resource packs that include some basic guidance for parents. Where available, teachers and schools should work with Traveller Education Support Services, and other Ethnic Minority & Traveller Achievement Services (EMTAS) to ensure GRT pupils are not forgotten.
- Ensure children on free school meals still have access to their meals and/or the new voucher scheme. This includes infant children with universal access but for whom the voucher scheme excludes.
- Make schools aware that the predicted grading system will be biased toward GRT, other nomadic groups such as New Travellers, Circus families, Showmen, Boaters etc. and BME pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Establish guidance on how to overcome these biases.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ippr.org/files/2020-03/1585586431\\_children-of-the-pandemic.pdf](https://www.ippr.org/files/2020-03/1585586431_children-of-the-pandemic.pdf)

It is crucial that the government ensure that the educational gaps Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children already face are not widened further by the response to the pandemic. We urge you to take this letter and its recommendations seriously.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards.

**Pauline Anderson OBE**, chair of the Traveller Movement

**Lisa Smith**, Chair of the Advisory Council for the Education of Romany and other Travellers (ACERT)

Co-signed by: