

The future of education support for London's Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities

Report from the Parliamentary meeting 29th February 2012



'Traveller Education Services (TES) helped and supported Bridy to stay in school, when she was bullied they helped her so much and she has done so well. But now I need support with my son who has learning difficulties and due to the cut backs they (TES) are no longer available.'

Tina Purcell (Irish Traveller, Greenwich)

'Gypsy and Traveller children experience the poorest education outcomes of any group in the UK, yet Traveller Education Services are being cut by local authorities at an extremely worrying and disproportionate rate in London and throughout the country. It is crucial that the Department for Education, local authorities and schools ensure that this vulnerable group's right to education is respected and fulfilled.'

Lord Avebury (All Party Parliamentary Group for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, Chair of Department for Education Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Stakeholder Group)

Introduction

Last year an investigation by Traveller's Times revealed that 12 out of the 32 Traveller Education Services (TES) in the London Boroughs had been abolished since 2007. The investigation also revealed that TES front-line staff had been halved from 60 to 30, making London the worst affected region in England.¹ Considering Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils experience the lowest educational attainment and highest rate of school exclusions of any group in England, the dramatic cuts to TES in London are of serious concern to community members and those working with these communities.

In anticipation of further cuts, the Irish Traveller Movement in Britain (ITMB) and the Advisory Council for the Education of Romany and other Travellers (ACERT) organised a Parliamentary meeting to urgently address this issue. The meeting was chaired by Lord Avebury and attended by community members and a wide range of professionals working in the area. This report outlines the key issues raised in this meeting:

- Key concerns regarding cuts to TES and lack of education support
- Protecting and supporting the future of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller education
- The role of London Boroughs, schools, community members and third sector

1. Key Concerns

The meeting raised specific concerns about the scale of the cuts in London and their impact on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children's education. Large swathes of London have had the majority of their TES abolished leaving no means of community engagement and support for these communities. The Travellers Times investigation found that South London has been particularly badly hit, with Bexley, Greenwich, Kingston Upon-Thames, Lambeth, Newham, Lewisham and Southwark all abolishing their TES without any support service replacing it.²

Below are some of the critical functions supplied by TES (as raised in the meeting) that have been or will be lost in cuts made by London Boroughs:

Community Engagement

- TES have been the key statutory link enabling access and rights to education for many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, **building positive relationships** in education and enabling other statutory services to better engage.
- They have **enabled home-school mediation**, ensured issues of

¹ Travellers Times, 25th November 2011

<http://www.travellerstimes.org.uk/list.aspx?c=00619ef1-21e2-40aa-8d5e-f7c38586d32f&n=0a5a6332-c5cb-42bb-a31a-133ac186adb>

² Ibid

exclusion, attendance, school expectations and SEN are appropriately addressed, including 'Every Child Matters'

- TES are crucial for conducting **educational assessments** on the needs of children and young people, especially those living on unauthorised encampments and sites.

Irish Traveller pupil, Greenwich

Bridy Purcell is a 15 year old Irish Traveller from Greenwich who is presently studying for her GCSE's and achieving high grades at school. Bridy told the meeting that Greenwich TES played a crucial role in keeping her in school and supporting her educational development. However, Greenwich TES has since been abolished leaving Bridy and her younger brother – who has severe learning difficulties – with no professional support to help them through education.

Engaging schools and other agencies

- TES's role is crucial as a safety net stopping children falling through the net and often acting as a trusted professional and go between for children/families, schools and professionals
- TES have been crucial in supplying local schools with **guidance and training** on engaging Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities (e.g. cultural awareness training) including Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month (GRTHM). They have also engaged a wide range of other agencies such as NHS Trusts, Youth Offender Teams and Education Welfare Services.
- Supporting mainstream provision entitlements and intervention programmes, working with Head teachers/ teachers to improve access (eg difficulties include free school meals, uniform, affects on results)

Mobility, Monitoring and Data

- London's local **TES network has been critical for tracking Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children who may be moving between Boroughs, ensuring the Councils duty to provide an education is met.** Without TES there will be no mechanism to monitor these children which could lead to Councils not fulfilling their duties in safeguarding children. Presently when a TES is cut the held ethnic data is lost or not accessible.
- **Monitoring mainstream service delivery** and acting as a safety net where families fall through the net. Including monitoring and support for all key points of transfer especially from Year 6 to 7 and encouragement around Early Years Education and post 16.

TES worker Waltham Forest

Peter Norton is the only TES worker for the London Borough of Waltham Forest (LBWF) and provides education support for 610 Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children. He told the meeting that as of April 2012 he and TES are to be cut leaving the Borough without any worker to engage with these highly vulnerable communities. LBWF have stated that providing TES is not a statutory duty.

Lack of capacity

- The numerous Gypsy, Traveller and Roma third sector organisations at the meeting acknowledged the important role the sector play in education, however, expressed serious concerns about filling the vacuum left by the abolished TES. They repeatedly made the point that the third/voluntary sector should not and cannot be seen as a replacement to TES. The meeting agreed that the role of the third sector needs to be defined.
- Examples were cited by some third sector organisations of councils providing minimal funding for Traveller education support, and while funding is always appreciated, it was by no means adequate in proportion to the need.

2. Protecting and supporting education services

The meeting shared many experiences and ideas about how best to protect and support existing TES and other Traveller educational support services. They ranged from threatening legal action under the Equalities Act 2010 to utilising current legislation, guidance and reporting.

Legal Action and reporting

- Examples were cited where the **threat of legal action (judicial review) under the Equalities Act 2010** had deterred a council from proceeding with cuts to funding for Traveller education support services. However, it was highlighted that to bring a strong case under the Equalities Act you need statistics and a strong evidence base. In this respect the meeting acknowledged the challenges (discrimination, bullying) and importance of promoting self ascription amongst the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.
- It was suggested at the meeting that the **EHRC and their legal department should be updated and engaged** on the issue of cuts to TES and the wider inequalities experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Travellers in education.
- **Reporting the implications of cuts to OFSTED** was given as an alternative to threat of legal action.³

³ OFSTED, 2010, *Whistleblowing to Ofsted about safeguarding in local authority children's services*
<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/whistleblowing-ofsted-about-safeguarding-local-authority-childrens-services>

Legislation, lobbying and guidance

- The meeting was updated that the 2010 Equalities Act requires schools – alongside all other public bodies covered by the specific equality duties – to publish **equalities objectives by the 6 April 2012** and thereafter at least every 4 years.⁴ This requirement provides the opportunity to ensure Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children's right to education is properly fulfilled by local schools.
- Engaging and **lobbying Councils and local Councillor's** was highlighted as a key measure to protect and support local services. The London Irish Councillors Network was given as an example of a network which could be utilised along with focusing on specific members in the GLA and London Councils
- The meeting was reminded that DoE guidance for schools still includes Gypsies and Travellers. This guidance can be used to support the case to retain services.

School Equalities Objectives

Listed bodies must:

- Prepare and publish equality objectives by 6 April 2012, and at least every four years after that.
- Ensure that the objectives are specific and measurable, and set out how progress towards the objectives will be measured.
- Publish details of their engagement in developing the equality objectives also at least every four years, and in line with their publication of objectives.
- Consider its published equality information before preparing and publishing these objectives.
- Publish the objectives in a reasonably accessible format either as an individual document or as part of another report.

EHRC guidance on equalities objectives

⁴ EHRC, 2011, Equality objectives and the equality duty: a guide for public authorities, p. 6
http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/EqualityAct/PSED/objectives_guidance.pdf

3. Working together: London Boroughs, Schools, Community members and the Third Sector

The meeting agreed that greater partnership working was key to ensuring future provision of Traveller education support services. Such partnership critically includes London Boroughs and schools working with community members and representative groups. As previously mentioned; community members and the third sector alone are not and cannot be a replacement for cuts to TES.

Engaging with teachers and schools

- Need for **greater engagement and partnership with teachers and headteachers** was raised as a key measure to promote awareness and develop better support and understanding of Traveller education.
- Considering more schools will be directly responsible for their own budgets, **greater engagement with local schools**, and not just the local authority, was discussed as a key area for action.

Good practice, partnership working and community involvement

- The meeting gave examples of Councils funding and supporting Traveller education support services with positive outcomes. It was agreed that such examples need to be promoted amongst the London Boroughs (especially those who have made 100% cuts).
- London Boroughs need to work at a pan-London and regional level to address this issue. For this reason **engaging and influencing London Councils strategic policy on education and children** is a key area of work.
- It was suggested in the meeting that **TES workers could establish a working Co-op** which would support those TES's that had been cut.
- The meeting also discussed the use of **online social networks** to raise awareness of Gypsy, Roma, Traveller education and the impact of the cuts.
- **Greater community involvement in providing support services** was raised by many in the meeting. Examples were given of Gypsy, Roma and Travellers being employed as teaching staff and assistants and of community attendance going up as a result of their involvement.

Moving forward

- Revitalise and strengthen the DfE Gypsy Roma Traveller Stakeholder group to hold the DfE to account. Revise/update membership of the group to ensure active community members and representative groups are engaged.
- Engage with London Councils executive members and senior staff responsible for children and education raising the need for a strategic approach to education support for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children.

- Engage with the Mayors Inquiry into London Schools to highlight the impact of cuts to TES and the key issue of low attainment, attendance and high exclusion rates.
- Update the existing research on cuts to TES both in London and Nationally
- Work with Travellers Times Magazine and other media to promote best practice and circulate information.
- Lobby GLA members and London Political Groups
- Ensure schools are including Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in their 4 year equalities objectives as required under the Equality Act 2010. Develop information materials, briefings etc to support the case for inclusion.
- Possibility for third sector partnership – including national bullying charities, NUT – to mount a London or national campaign to promote inclusion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in schools equality objectives.
- The DoE, Local Authorities and local schools need to financially and logistically support greater partnership working with third sector organisations in the provision of future education support.