

Written evidence submitted by the Traveller Movement (CWSB210)

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

Public Bill Committee Call for Evidence

About the Traveller Movement

The Traveller Movement is a registered UK charity promoting inclusion and community engagement with Romani (Gypsies), Roma and Irish Travellers. The Traveller Movement seeks to empower and support Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities to advocate for the full implementation of their human rights.

Introduction

The purpose of the Children's Well-Being and Schools Bill ('the Bill') is to enhance child safeguarding, raise educational standards, and streamline data-sharing between public services. There are a number of provisions in the Bill that are very welcome, including the limit on the number of branded items of school uniforms and free breakfast clubs in primary schools in England. It's regrettable that the impact assessments have not been published, and to date we have seen no evidence that the potential impact on Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities has been considered or addressed. However, it is critical to consider how certain provisions may adversely impact these communities, whose lifestyle, cultural practices, and relationship with formal educational systems often differs from the mainstream.

Clause 4 - Single Unique Identifier (SUI) for Children/Data Sharing and Safeguarding

The Bill proposes the creation of a single unique identifier (SUI) for children, and the government have indicated that this will be their NHS number. This identifier would be used by public bodies to share information about children, potentially allowing for more effective coordination of services across different agencies.¹ Public agencies will be required to share information about children when it is considered relevant to safeguarding or promoting a child's welfare.

¹ House of Commons, [Children's Wellbeing and School's Bill](#), 2024

Impact on Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller Communities:

There is evidence that some child protection strategies and systems may exacerbate inequalities and perpetuate harm for children in marginalised groups, including racialised children and children living in deprived areas. Maslaha's [Radical Safeguarding](#) Workbook demonstrates how child protection and crime reduction initiatives can lead to disproportionate harm for racialised children and young people where policies rely upon identity-based risk profiling. Safeguarding initiatives that necessitate elements of profiling and surveillance (e.g., the Prevent duty and the now-scrapped gangs matrix) have been evidenced as disproportionately harmful for some children, including racialised children.² The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) include in their best practice guidance that unconscious bias may impact child protection professionals' effectiveness when working with racialised children.³ Research has further found that "the institutional context and organisational structure of children's social care is contributing to systematic inequalities in provision" along lines of race and class, whereby factors such as deprivation levels in the local area have a significant effect on the provision of children's social care services such as child protection plans.⁴ The introduction of an SUI seeks, in part, to address inequity and gaps in child protection practices.

Given the varied effectiveness and – at times – risks posed by some current child protection practices and systems, it is worth considering how we can mitigate against those risks. This is something we would have expected to see in the impact assessments. For instance, could the relevant data be destroyed when a child reaches adulthood, in accordance with Data Protection requirements? Can steps be taken to mitigate a potential discriminatory chilling effect on children or families seeking support who may perceive themselves to become (or materially become) vulnerable to information-sharing because of the introduction of a SUI. This is particularly true of communities who mistrust public officials.

Excessive Surveillance: The tracking of children via the SUI number could be perceived as an infringement on the privacy and autonomy of families who have historically faced marginalisation and excessive surveillance by public authorities. This could exacerbate fears of state surveillance, discouraging Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller families from engaging with public services altogether and increase the already high levels of mistrust of authorities as set out in our [submission](#) to the UN committee on the elimination of racial

² See, e.g., Amnesty International (2023) 'This is the Thought Police': The Prevent duty and its chilling effect on human rights' November 2023; Liberty (2022) 'Met to Overhaul 'Racist' Gangs Matrix after Landmark Legal Challenge' 11 November 2022.

³ 40 NSPCC (2024) 'Safeguarding children who come from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities' 31 October 2024.

⁴ Hood, R. et al. (2020) 'Identifying and understanding the link between system conditions and welfare inequalities in children's social care services' March 2020, p. 100

discrimination in 2024. Levels of mistrust have not been helped by the increasingly hostile relationship between police and the communities especially with the introduction of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 ('the Police Act') which essentially criminalises the traditional way of life of Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller communities. This distrust stems from many years of negative experiences with authority figures, including local authorities, the police and schools. Levels of mistrust also led to low take up of the vaccine during the Covid pandemic which contributed to very high levels of mortality as set out in our [statement](#) to the UK Covid Inquiry. The proposed data-sharing requirements could heighten concerns that personal and sensitive information will be shared without adequate consent or oversight, potentially leading to discrimination. It could also prompt community members to withdraw from different health services to avoid this level of increased surveillance.

The broad scope of the data-sharing provision could disproportionately affect Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children, particularly if agencies use the information to justify interventions based on stereotypes about Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities, such as assumptions about neglect or non-compliance with formal schooling.

Clause 24 - Local Authority Consent for Withdrawal of Certain Children from School

The Bill mandates that the local authority will be able to restrict parents from withdrawing certain children from school for the purpose of educating them "otherwise than at school" if:

- They are at a special school maintained by a local authority, special academy or non-maintained special school, or at an independent school which is specially organised to make special educational provision for pupils with special educational needs, where the child became a registered pupil at that school under arrangements made by the local authority,
- They are the subject of an enquiry by the local authority under section 47 of the Children Act 1989, are receiving ongoing support from the local authority under section 47(8) of the Children Act 1989 because it has been determined that they are suffering or likely to suffer significant harm (i.e. children on child protection plans)
- They are receiving ongoing support from the local authority under section 47(8) of the Children Act 1989 because it has been determined that they are suffering or likely to suffer significant harm (i.e. children on child protection plans)

Whilst we have no direct issues with clause 24, the department for education must be mindful that these communities often mistrust social and children's welfare services (CWS), which

likely stems from the increasing number of referrals being made to CWS and the increasing number of child protection plans being put in place.⁵

The current poor and limited data collection means that the statistical evidence needed to fully substantiate claims that they are overrepresented in these services, rather than just disproportionately referred to these services does not exist, despite being a concern for decades. But with the limited data available, we can see that the evidence points in this direction. In 2011, there was no data to suggest Gypsy/Roma were overrepresented in CWS at Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPC), but by 2017/18, Gypsy Roma were 2.0 times more likely to be considered at an ICPC and Irish Travellers were 3.11 more times likely to be considered than children from 'all other' ethnic groups.⁶

Clauses 25 and 26 - Register of Children Not in School and School Attendance Orders

The Bill mandates that local authorities will maintain a register of children not in school, with there being a requirement of Local Authorities to produce School Attendance Orders (SAOs), for parents who do not comply with registration requirements, followed by penalties and potential imprisonment for parents.

Impact Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller Communities:

Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller families may not follow traditional education routes, with parents frequently opting for home-schooling prompted by discrimination faced in mainstream education, with research showing that 80% of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Traveller children have faced bullying or name calling in education.⁷ The Bill's requirement to register children who are not in formal schooling does not appear to take account of these circumstances which could lead to Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller families being unfairly penalised. Without targeting the drivers into elective home education, the Bill will fail to raise educational standards in these communities.

Penalties and Criminalisation: The imposition of fines or imprisonment for non-compliance with the register and school attendance orders could lead to the criminalisation of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller families who are unable or unwilling to comply with the formal schooling system. This could exacerbate existing tensions between Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities and local authorities. These communities already face

⁵ The Traveller Movement, [the care system and Gypsies, Roma and Travellers: an investigation](#), 2017

⁶ The British Journal of Social Work, [Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children in Child Welfare Services in England](#), 2022

⁷ House of Commons Library, [Gypsies and travellers: educational outcomes](#), 2024

higher levels of poverty, and without targeting the drivers into elective home education, these communities will continue to struggle in education.

Excessive Data Collection: As Conservative MP Damian Hind said during the first sitting of the public bill committee, the level of information required from parents for the children not in school is ‘unnecessary’ and can be ‘rather onerous’ for parents who can be home educating in very difficult circumstances.⁸

Local Authority Increased Powers: Under these new powers local authorities will be able to request any information they deem necessary. They can also deny the request to home school if they consider it is in the best interest of the child to remain in mainstream education. They do not have to reconsider their decision for another six months. One of the criteria they will use to make that decision is whether they consider the home environment to be safe and fit for purpose. There is currently an over estimation of risk by public officials who visit sites. This in turn may prompt local authorities to deny a disproportionate number of requests from these communities. The overestimation stems from the environmental racism that has come from the local authorities placing sites in areas that can lead to these communities facing a disproportionate level of environmental hazards as highlighted by Katherine’s Quarmby’s research for the Hamlyn Foundation⁹ and that the failure of some local authorities to provide new sites has led to overcrowding.

The power given to local authorities to request whatever information they deem necessary will result in different practices in different areas. This will make it extremely difficult to monitor or identify poor practice, including practices and procedures that may be discriminatory. This will be exacerbated by the lack of specialist knowledge or training on the Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities at local authority level.

Recommendations:

Consent and Transparency: The government must ensure that families are fully informed and that their consent is sought before information is shared. Transparent processes for data-sharing should be in place, with clear boundaries on what information can be shared and why.

Cultural Sensitivity Training: Public agencies involved in data-sharing should be trained on the specific cultural context of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities to ensure that safeguarding actions are carried out with an understanding of Romani (Gypsy),

⁸ UK Parliament Hansard, [Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill \(First Sitting\)](#), 2025

⁹ Alice Bloch and Katherine Quarmby, [Environmental racism, segregation and discrimination: Gypsy and Traveller sites in Great Britain](#), 2024

Roma and Irish Traveller ways of life, and to avoid unwarranted assumptions about neglect or abuse.

Duty to Record Incidents of Racist and Faith Based Bullying: Introduce a duty on schools to record and report incidents of racist and faith-based bullying would help address some of the drivers to homeschooling. A duty would help establish accountability and trust, letting families know that that incidents are reported, recorded and addressed. This was previously good practice in schools following on from recommendations in the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry.¹⁰

Deletion of Data: Strong safeguards should be implemented to ensure that the data collected on the register is only used for the intended purposes and is not misused to further scrutinise or target Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller families unfairly. We recommend therefore that the data should be deleted once a child reaches adulthood at the age of 18. The data may be held until 25 in select cases including young people with SEND.

Issues with Fining and Punitive Measures: Punishing families for non-compliance is unlikely to improve educational standards. It will increase poverty in these communities, directly through the imposition of fines and indirectly through the loss of a parent to imprisonment. Many parents from these communities are turning to elective home education because the educational system has failed them and their children. That is the issue that needs to be addressed. Fining does not address the underlying causes of non-attendance which our research concludes is caused by institutional racism in the majority of cases.

Focus on Drivers into Home Education: Many young members of these communities withdraw from mainstream school due to the level of discrimination and bullying they experience. Many of these drivers stem from what we coin as ‘coercive exclusions’ which is when schools, either through action or inaction, create a persistently toxic environment which force families to withdraw from formal education.¹¹ That parents and grandparents frequently experienced racism in education must also be taken into account. This is not exclusive to our Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities. Data produced by the Department for Education¹² shows that there has been a significant increase in persistence absence in all secondary schools including high achieving grammar schools. The Sunday Times reported in January 2025 that the number of children classed as ‘persistently absent’ in grammar schools has more than doubled over a four-year period from 2019 to 2023, and

¹⁰ Insted Consultancy, [Recording and reporting racist incidents in school](#), 2012

¹¹ Traveller Movement, [Fought not Taught: Addressing Coercive Exclusions of Romani \(Gypsy\), Roma and Irish Traveller Children](#), 2024

¹² Gov.UK, [DfE Pupil absence in schools in England](#), 2024

across state schools the number has risen from 13% to 24%¹³. We need to address the cause and not just the symptoms.

It is important that local authorities understand what is driving elective home education so that problems can be identified and addressed. We recommend that schools should be mandated to ask and record why parents are removing children from school and share this information with local authorities. This work could become part of the role of attendance officers. Access to this information will help local authorities identify the drivers and help them work with schools and families to address the issues. It will also help build trust in communities. This information could be included in the Report Card system Ofsted plan to introduce at the end of the year. These detailed School Report Cards will provide a full picture of how schools are performing in various areas and will be sent to parents annually.

Introduce a Free Cultural Sports Offer in Education: The priority should be to get children from these communities a high-quality education. These new provisions are unlikely to do that, so we are suggesting introducing a cultural offer of education in which children who are electively home educated receive culturally enriching offers such as visits to local art galleries, museums, theatres and practical art activity. Similarly free access to sports including swimming, football, athletics and others would enhance the educational experience and increase positive health outcomes.

Our online education offer, [Open Doors Education and Training \(ODET\)](#), illustrates how an alternative approach to home education systems can deliver in these communities. **ODET** was established in 2021 in response to the rising number of children not in education or training (NEET), and the overrepresentation of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers in this cohort. ODET offers one-to-one personal tutoring, with specific programmes targeting NEET students helping them gain level 2 functional skills in English and Maths through 5 hours of tailored tuition per week.¹⁴ We aimed to help young members of these communities access this kind of education, as in our work with families over the years and during the COVID-19 pandemic, it became clear that high levels of digital poverty were seen on sites and this poor connectivity was excluding children from online learning

Conclusion

The Bill presents an opportunity to introduce duties and practices that will support local authorities, schools and families in raising educational standards. That includes families who have a preference for elective home education and those who feel driven to remove their children from mainstream education. Planned interventions to monitor and direct families

¹³ The Times, [Grammar school truancy doubles to one in seven pupils](#), 2025

¹⁴ The Traveller Movement, [Reimagining Futures](#), 2023

who opt for elective home education are overly focused on enforcement and compliance, with the threat of sanctions. We believe the focus should be on putting in place measures that will ensure local authorities and schools work with these families, ideally with the intention of children returning to school. In the interim it's important that these children continue to access a high-quality education.

6 February 2025