



Autumn 2024

# Submission to the Call for Evidence on Improving the Curriculum and Assessment System

Joint Submission on behalf of  
Friends, Families and Travellers  
& Roma Support Group

## Introduction

This is a joint submission by [Friends, Families and Travellers](#) with [Roma Support Group](#) to the Government's [call for evidence on Improving the Curriculum and Assessment System](#).

To respond to this call for evidence, we used evidence from our ongoing work and additionally, consulted on the call for evidence with 47 pupils and parents, including Irish Travellers (4), Romany Gypsies (37), Roma (5), and a Travelling Showman, to inform the following key points and highlight the views of the communities.

The sections below are numbered according to the call for evidence submission, and only feature relevant questions.

***Q13. In the current curriculum, assessment system, and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access, or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other protected characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity)?***

During this review, we urge Government to take meaningful steps to address the persisting stark educational inequalities experienced by Romany Gypsies, Irish Travellers and Roma. To fully understand the educational experiences of the distinct ethnic groups, the Department for Education should ensure that ethnicity data is disaggregated in collection and reporting. Currently, the ethnicity education data aggregates Romany Gypsies and Roma into one category 'Gypsy/Roma', which conceals the diversity of the two ethnic groups and the different inequalities experienced.

Data shows that Romany Gypsies, Roma, and Irish Travellers have the lowest educational attainment, at all key stages up to and including KS4, out of any ethnic groups in the UK. For example:

- In the [2021 to 2022 school year](#), only 8.5% of 'Gypsy/Roma' pupils and 14.4% of Irish Traveller pupils obtained a grade 5 or above in GCSE English and math's, compared to 49.8% for all pupils.
- In the [academic year 2023/24](#), just 18% of 'Gypsy/Roma' pupils and 20% of Irish Traveller pupils met the expected standard in reading, writing, and maths at the end of key stage 2, compared with an average of 61%.
- The [Education Policy Institute's 2024 Annual Report](#) noted that by the end of primary school in 2023 'Gypsy/Roma' pupils were 18.2 months behind and Irish Traveller pupils were 16.6 months behind White British pupils. By the end of secondary school Gypsy/Roma and Irish Traveller pupils were 30 months and 21 months behind White British pupils.

Anecdotal evidence from Roma Support Group also suggests pupils don't feel supported in their learning and exams, with a trend of Roma pupils reporting being discouraged from sitting exams in cases where there is a concern that pupils may not pass.

Additionally, national education data sets indicate high drop-off rates among 'Gypsy/Roma' and Irish Traveller pupils, particularly at key points in education such as entering secondary education. Data from the [School Census received in response to FOI requests from Friends, Families, and Travellers](#) shows a consistently significant fall in pupil numbers continuing from Year 6 (primary) to Year 7 (secondary), with an average fall of 22%. It is important to note that drop-off rates will be due to a variety of factors.

Another issue regarding the educational experiences of Romany Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers is the disproportionate rates of suspension and exclusions. For example, in 2022/23 the permanent exclusion rate for 'Gypsy/Roma' pupils was 0.43

and 0.35 for Irish Traveller pupils. This is compared to the overall permanent exclusion rate of 0.11. In the same year, the suspension rate for 'Gypsy/Roma' pupils was 33.71 and 21.77 for Irish Traveller pupils. This is compared to an overall suspension rate of 9.33.

Due to the high rates of exclusion and suspension, Romany Gypsies, Roma, and Irish Travellers are disproportionately represented in alternative provision and pupil referral units. According to the Institute for Public Policy Research 2024 report titled "[Who Is Losing Learning](#)," during the academic year 2022/23, Romany Gypsy and Roma pupils were four times more likely, and Irish Traveller pupils were three times more likely than the national average to be placed in alternative provision or pupil referral units.

The Institute for Public Policy Research 2024 report also highlighted the poor quality of some alternative provision/pupil referral units, with children over three times more likely to be taught by an unqualified teacher and over half of children not being entered for maths and English GCSEs and of those who are, fewer than 5% achieve a standard pass.

Another issue affecting the educational experiences and attainment of Romany Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller pupils is racially motivated bullying. The [Anti-Bullying Alliance](#) found that 86% of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children reported the biggest challenge at school to be bullying. Furthermore, research carried out by [Roma Support Group](#) in 2019 found that out of 110 children surveyed, 34% held negative views when asked about 'Roma/Gypsy'.

Experiences of race hate, stereotyping, and bullying were reported frequently among the parents and pupils surveyed during this call for evidence, for example:

- *My kids have experienced a lot of racism in the school, from teachers and other kids. It hasn't been dealt with well in the school at all and I wish I could take them out.* — Romany Gypsy parent.

- *My kids had a lot of bullying in the school and they need to find a way to make people feel more welcome cos they can't learn when they're being called p\*\*\*y all the time, they don't understand our culture.'* — Irish Traveller parent.
- *'I took my children out of school recently because they experienced race hate in school, violent threats, and the school did nothing about it.'* — Romany Gypsy parent.

There is also a lack of visibility and inclusion of the cultures and histories of Gypsy, Traveller, and Roma communities within education settings. There are positive actions that schools can take, such as signing up to the '[Gypsy, Traveller, Roma, Showmen and Boaters' Pledge for Schools](#)'. This contains a set of actions to improve access, retention, and outcomes for these pupils, such as inclusion, celebration, and commemoration of the varied Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller cultures, monitoring bullying, and cultural awareness training for staff.

Pupils and parents surveyed as part of this call for evidence also suggested that additional support was needed in terms of internet access, translation, and a dedicated member of support staff to increase accessibility:

- *'[We] should be offered more emotional understanding and support, as well as in some cases material support.'* — Roma pupil.
- *'Traveller pupils should have a dedicated member of staff they can speak to.'* — Romany Gypsy pupil.
- *'Extra support is needed for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller support, we should be made to feel welcome, not excluded.'* — Romany Gypsy pupil.
- *'School communication should not be limited to digital platforms like Dojo. Some parents face challenges such as digital exclusion or illiteracy, which can hinder their ability to engage with the school community effectively. Offering alternative communication methods would ensure inclusivity for all parents.'* — Roma parent.

- *'For it to be more accessible schools should give us dongles for any online work we have to do as almost all [Gypsy and Traveller] sites have horrible internet. Sometimes it's so bad that you cannot even load up google without it taking forever.'* — Romany Gypsy pupil.

To address the stark inequalities and significantly higher dropout rates, there need to be a broad set of measures applied nationally and beyond what's in the curriculum and assessment system. There needs to be a clear and comprehensive strategy to address educational inequalities and attainment gaps.

***Q23. Are there particular changes that could be made to ensure the curriculum (including qualification content) is more diverse and representative of society?***

The lack of visibility and understanding of the communities' cultures and histories is a contributing factor to the poor educational experiences and outcomes experienced by Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller pupils. Equally, the Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities recommended in [2023](#) that the United Kingdom should:

*'Ensure the representation of minorities across curricula in the UK, as well as in teaching and learning materials and teacher training, with special attention also paid to the culture[sic], history[sic], traditions and identities of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers.'*

Positive actions, such as including the histories of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities in school curricula and celebrating Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller History Month in June, would contribute to a wider understanding that the communities are an integral part of both national and European societies.

There is also little representation of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people in books used in schools, highlighted by a [2020 Council of Europe research project](#) on 20 European countries, which showed that the UK came joint lowest on coverage of Roma in school textbooks. The inclusion of positive narratives about Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities is a crucial component of creating a welcoming learning environment for these pupils.

Pupils and parents surveyed during this call for evidence reported a lack of understanding and fair representation of their cultures and histories in the school setting, and this fed into a lack of tolerance towards individual pupils. 46 out of 47 parents and pupils surveyed said there was a need for the celebration of their respective culture and history in schools to promote a sense of inclusion and representation. Views expressed included:

- *'They don't teach anything in the school about our culture or history.'* — Irish Traveller parent.
- *'Maybe schools should teach about the history of our community rather than neglecting it like they always do...If they could talk about our culture and the day-to-day problems we face with racism, stereotypes and unfair bias when it comes to someone being trialled in court plus many other things people will understand us more and won't be afraid to come up to us and talk with us.'*  
— Romany Gypsy pupil.
- *'In my opinion, at the moment there is not enough emphasis around Roma culture...as is usually stereotyped into an underachieving, disengaged, unambitious and many other labels that are wrongly given to Roma children...'*  
— Roma pupil.
- *'I feel that we should live in a world where there are no months needed for any community. We should just be treated as equals and that every month we get treated the same and that we are constantly learning about people as communities change.'* — Romany Gypsy pupil.

- *‘Yes, they should do more to celebrate, in cooking once a month, the kids could bring bacon pudding in so others can learn about the culture.’* — Irish Traveller parent.
- *‘Staff should receive cultural awareness training, looking at how we communicate and our traditions.’* — Romany Gypsy pupil.
- *‘Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Month should be celebrated as it will raise more awareness to the other people and would make the students that are part of this ethnicity feel more included in the society and proud for being part of it.’* — Roma pupil.

The Government should implement the Council of Europe [recommendation](#) of July 2020 that Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller histories and cultures, including the Roma Genocide, be on the school curriculum. It is important to include historical periods of persecution as a way of challenging hate. Whilst teaching about the Holocaust is mandatory as part of the curriculum, the experience of all victims in addition to Jewish people is not. [Research commissioned by Friends, Families and Travellers with YouGov](#) in 2019 found that 55% of British adults surveyed did not know that over 500,000 Roma and Sinti people were killed by the Nazis in the Holocaust. Including teaching on Roma and Sinti victims of the Holocaust would act as an effective tool to combat hatred, discrimination, and prejudice.

All 47 parents and pupils surveyed as part of this call for evidence, said they felt it was important to teach about the Roma and Sinti victims of the Holocaust and that these victims are often left out of teachings in school. Views expressed included:

- *‘All I will say is that I have learned a lot about the victims of the Holocaust, but never Gypsies.’* — Romany Gypsy pupil.
- *‘We have not learned about this in school, and I don’t think others know about it outside of school.’* — Romany Gypsy pupil.
- *‘[There is] little to no emphasis on the other groups who also suffered during [the Holocaust]. These groups included Roma, and others, whose stories are equally important for a comprehensive understanding of the Holocaust’s*



*impact. Broadening this perspective would provide a fuller picture of the atrocities and ensure that all victims are remembered.’ — Roma parent.*

- *‘At the moment when teaching about the Holocaust all the emphasis is on Jewish communities, and little to none on the other victims of it.’ — Roma pupil.*
- *‘We must not forget history but learn from it and use our knowledge to have greater understandings of failures past and what can be done better and why it happened.’ — Romany Gypsy pupil.*

***Q33. To what extent and how do pupils benefit from being able to take vocational or applied qualifications in secondary schools alongside more academically focused GCSEs?***

Some Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller young people would like ‘release’ from school to do vocational courses between the ages of 14 and 16, however, there is often insufficient funding for them to be able to do so. Pupils benefit from the opportunity to take these courses as they provide learning opportunities for a broad range of interests and learning styles outside of the traditional academic learning environment. Additionally, vocational education can enhance school engagement and lower the likelihood of students leaving the education system without any qualifications. This is particularly important for Romany Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller pupils, who are at a high risk of this outcome.

***Q34. To what extent does the current pre-16 vocational offer equip pupils with the necessary knowledge and skills and prepare them***

***for further study options, including 16-19 technical pathways and/or A levels? Could the pre-16 vocational offer be improved?***

Yes, the offer could be improved to support further study. Currently, courses on offer predominantly equip pupils for elementary career paths such as catering, beauty therapy, hairdressing, mechanics, art and construction and do not necessarily encourage further study or entering into higher education. These courses could expand to support pupils into higher education and open up a variety of other professional or managerial career paths.

Whilst the 2021 Census suffers the same pitfalls of grouping together distinct ethnic categories, in this case treating 'Romany Gypsy/Irish Traveller' as a single category, it nevertheless reveals several trends among Romany Gypsies, Roma, and Irish Travellers that highlight the need for improved and diverse pre-16 learning opportunities. This enhancement is essential to increase qualification rates and equip students with the skills necessary for a range of occupations. For example:

- The [2021 Census](#) found that 28.5% of employed people who identified as Roma and 24.6% of people who identified as Romany Gypsy or Irish Traveller held elementary occupations (such as cleaners, postal workers and bar staff), compared to just over 10% of the England and Wales population.
- The [2021 Census](#) showed that 56.8% of those who identified as Romany Gypsy or Irish Traveller had no qualifications, compared with 18.2% of the England and Wales population.
- 30.9% of those who identified as Roma in the Census reported "No qualifications" compared with 18.2% of the population of England and Wales.

All 47 parents and pupils surveyed felt that increased and earlier access to vocational courses would be hugely beneficial and well aligned with their educational needs, for example:

- *‘Most Gypsies and Travellers are better at doing hands-on stuff and more mature for their age, so vocational courses would be good for us.’* — Romany Gypsy pupil.
- *‘Yes, like tree surgeons, then when they come out of school they have got a skill to use and earn money, it’s too late by the time they offer these courses.’* — Irish Traveller parent.
- *‘To make education more accessible for this ethnic group, students should have the opportunity to pursue vocational courses that suit their needs and aspirations.’* — Roma parent.
- *‘My kids have both autism and ADHD and they really struggled in school, there needs to be more facilities for practical learning, my son has thrived since he can do more practical learning in college. Practical learning should be embedded in the system from the start, not just an add-on because all children learn differently.’* — Romany Gypsy parent.
- *‘There should be more funding available for these courses, I struggled to get into the 14-16 vocational courses when I was in school.’* — Romany Gypsy pupil.

## About Friends, Families and Travellers

Friends, Families and Travellers is a leading national charity that works to end racism and discrimination against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and to protect the right to pursue a nomadic way of life.

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## About Roma Support Group

Roma Support Group seeks to improve the quality of life for Roma refugees and migrants by helping them to overcome prejudice, isolation and vulnerability.

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