Head teachers for children on the move

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) children are among the lowest achieving at every level of education.

In April 2012, a cross-departmental ministerial working group published 28 commitments to tackling inequalities faced by GRT communities. Six focused on education. Among plans to improve low school attendance and prevent bullying was a Department for Education pilot to appoint virtual head teachers for GRT pupils inspired by the successful virtual school heads model for looked-after children.

The pilot set out to raise attainment levels among GRT pupils by addressing common barriers to education including tackling mistrust between parents and teachers created by historic persecution of GRT communities, and engaging parents who may not have completed formal education themselves and be unfamiliar with school systems.

Some GRT groups live in caravans and move around the country for their work. This nomadic lifestyle is recognised by legislation that prevents GRT parents from prosecution if children are absent from school for up to 200 half-days a year. While some families try to place children in schools as they move around the country this can be hindered by a lack of places.

Other parents choose to home-educate children. Bill Forrester, chair of the National Association of Gypsy and Traveller Officers, believes the government should provide more support to ensure home schooling meets pupils’ needs, because some parents of GRT children at risk of exclusion choose this option under pressure from schools. “In one case, a mum was...”

Virtual school heads raise awareness among schools of the barriers to education faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and how best these difficulties can be overcome.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children can find it harder to achieve at school. Gabriella Jóźwiak reports on a scheme that saw councils employ virtual head teachers to help improve education for this group.
completely unequipped to do it,” he says. “Sometimes schools are trying to wash their hands of a problem.”

Another issue is the transition from primary to secondary school. At this point high numbers drop out, particularly girls who may marry young. “Attendance by 15 or 16 can be 20 per cent,” says Forrester.

According to Brian Foster, chair of the Advisory Council for the Education of Romany and other Travellers, the pilot was seen as a way forward after cuts decimated council-run Traveller education services across England. The role of GRT virtual heads, as defined by the working group, was to train and support schools, identify and return GRT children missing from school, and raise awareness among schools and others about barriers to success and how best to overcome them.

But Forrester is critical of the way the DfE managed the pilot. “The amount of money was insultingly small,” he points out. “It’s not enough for a full-time post.”

The DfE chose pilot areas on the basis of GRT population. Four local authorities took up the two-year scheme in 2012, but only Kent and Cambridgeshire county councils completed it (see boxes). Surrey County Council dropped out at the start due to lack of “capacity”. However, it has maintained its GRT teaching team and employs Traveller education support workers. Bradford ran the scheme for a year (see box). According to figures from the pilot areas, the DfE handed out about £146,500 over two years, retaining funds from disaffected authorities.

Claire Lockwood, joint president of the National Association of Teachers of Travellers and Other Professionals, says the pilot will provide little evidence because of the small sample. She also criticises the DfE for choosing local authorities with well-established Traveller services.

Lockwood also points out GRT children are a different kind of cohort to looked-after children. “Looked-after children are easier because local authorities know where they are and are partly responsible for them. GRT are a very transient population,” she says.

The DfE is due to publish the findings of the pilot this year. “We are working with both authorities on a summary of the lessons from their projects, which will be available soon,” says a spokesman.

All children’s services directors must understand the educational needs of this vulnerable group, says Association of Directors of Children’s Services committee member Joyce Thacker, strategic director of children and young people’s services at Rotherham Council. However, more support from government would be welcome: “The DfE could invest in GRT support in the same way it does with special educational needs and disability reforms, giving targeted resources with clear expectations on how this could be deployed.”

CAMBRIDGESHIRE: ROLE BOOSTED RESPECT FOR TRAVELLER EDUCATION WORKERS

More than half Cambridgeshire’s schools cater for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) pupils. The county council received £34,000 a year for the pilot and appointed Peter Norton as virtual head to work two days a week within its existing Race Equality and Diversity Service. This department was already set up to support GRT children. But, as service manager Bethan Rees explains, the team “weren’t going to say ‘no’” to additional resources.

Because of the low amount of funding, Cambridgeshire decided to work with schools it had previously engaged as part of the government’s 2008 Gypsy Roma and Traveller Achievement Programme. Sixteen out of the original 24 schools agreed to work with the virtual head, including primaries, secondaries and a children’s centre. The team used the DfE’s 2010 Improving Outcomes for GRT Pupils report to guide its work.

Norton, who had a background in Traveller education, began by identifying issues in schools. “None of the projects we worked on were particularly innovative,” he says. “They were the usual suspects, such as transition and transfer between primary and secondary.”

The project also addressed issues around distance learning during travelling seasons, including ensuring schools had books and resources reflecting GRT communities, and developing robust distance learning materials. Another issue was supporting pupils whose parents struggled to help them with homework. One school developed a specific section on the school website for GRT pupils to access during homework club. In the children’s centre, staff developed sessions to encourage GRT parents to read stories and sing nursery rhymes with children.

Rees, who delivered briefing sessions to school governors across the county, says the pilot helped raise awareness of GRT issues. Data collected by the team also suggests attainment gaps between GRT and non-GRT pupils narrowed. But Norton says the small numbers involved in the pilot make it hard to draw firm conclusions. However, he is positive about his role and says the virtual head title brought respect to the team. “Previously, Traveller education people have not always been treated equally by teachers,” he says. “You would often deal with an SEN co-ordinator or inclusion manager, but most of this project involved meetings with head teachers.”

Nevertheless, Norton and Rees are critical of the amount of funding, which only covered the virtual head salary with other posts supporting Norton’s work already funded by Creds. “We told the DfE the model of a virtual head is potentially better suited to a unitary or smaller authority that doesn’t have a Traveller education team,” says Rees. The council has decided to fund Norton for a subsequent year as a GRT adviser. “The role of virtual head teacher in an authority like ours is not that manageable,” concludes Rees.
KENT: EXPERTISE IS ESSENTIAL IN WORKING WITH GRT FAMILIES

KENT has more than 590 schools of which 275 have declared Gypsy or Roma pupils and 43 declared Travellers of Irish heritage. The local authority used £50,000 from the DfE over two years to appoint virtual head teacher Gillie Heath to lead its already-established Traveller team. “My team comprised three full-time equivalent advisory teachers and six outreach officers for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) achievement,” says Heath. “We couldn’t work directly with children because there were so few of us.”

Instead the team took a strategic approach, responding to issues as they arose, such as children missing education, and setting up nine champion schools for GRT achievement including primary and secondary schools, and a children’s centre. Work began with an audit of schools’ needs, looking at areas such as attainment, progress and attendance among GRT children. “We picked schools we knew had existing good practice, because we weren’t going to try to turn around schools in two years,” says Heath. “We went into lessons and noted what they were doing right and identified gaps.”

Heath and her team had previous experience of working with GRT communities – something she maintains was vital, enabling officers to visit parents on caravan sites and build relationships between them and teachers. The need for expertise was also demonstrated by the success of a 22-year-old from the Traveller community hired to work as an outreach officer. “He had experienced all the things young people we were working with had experienced,” says Heath. “He was excluded from school, and could only read and write at infant level when he started secondary school. He was able to act as a mentor, particularly with disaffected year 6 students and upwards, and re-engage them with schooling.”

The team advised schools on how to make their curriculum more inclusive to GRT children. For example, in a primary school they encouraged teachers to talk about mobile homes within existing projects on home life, rather than do specific lessons on GRT living practices.

As a result of the pilot, Heath says head teachers are more receptive to advice on GRT pupils and schools have reported improvements in attainment, attendance and behaviour. The vice principal of one school says the pilot made a “significant difference” for students at risk of permanent exclusion, adding: “Previously, issues included pupils unable to engage in class, rudeness and aggressive outbursts. Now there are more minor offences such as lack of homework or chatting.”

Heath’s role as virtual head is set to continue. The council has reorganised its departments, but retained the GRT officers in a new Early Help and Preventative Services Directorate while Heath’s role has been merged into the role of manager of the Inclusion Support Service. “It’s great my team are in school improvement,” says Heath. “I now have eight full-time equivalent teachers who cover GRT.”

BRADFORD: RECRUITMENT DIFFICULTIES

Bradford is home to more than 3,000 GRT children. The local authority ran the pilot scheme for only one year after experiencing problems hiring a GRT virtual head teacher. It received £28,500 from the DfE – an amount head of diversity and cohesion Jani Rashid says “wasn’t attractive enough to get the right person”. The person they appointed part-time left after seven months following heath concerns, having only begun to scope what issues the role would address.

However, Bradford already had well-developed GRT support services, which incorporate a service co-ordinator, teaching and learning assistants, and education social work staff. In 2009, following the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Achievement Programme, it launched the Bradford Roma Traveller Achievement Programme (BRTAP). Funded by its children’s services budget, this currently supports nine schools to raise attainment levels of GRT pupils. Last year the council also introduced three traineeships that specifically employ people with a GRT background to work in schools.

Rashid says increasing numbers of Eastern European Roma migrants coming to the area are putting new pressure on Bradford’s 207 schools. “They’re new children with new linguistic backgrounds,” he says. “We try to encourage schools where they have vacancies to consider employing people with the linguistic and cultural skills to be able to communicate with parents.”

GRT EDUCATION: KEY STATS

- Only 13.8% of Gypsy and Roma and 17.5% of Irish Traveller children achieved five or more A* to C GCSE grades in 2013 – the lowest of any ethnic group. The proportion for all pupils was 60.6%.
- GRT GCSE candidates represented only 0.2% (957 children) of the total number of students (571,334) who sat the exams in 2013. Of these, half were eligible for free school meals.
- More Gypsy and Roma, and Irish Traveller children were permanently excluded from school in 2011/12 than any other ethnic group - 0.31% and 0.28% respectively - compared with a national average of 0.08% for all pupils.
- 15.1% of Gypsy and Roma and 16.3% of Irish Traveller children were temporarily excluded from school in 2011/12 compared with a national average of 4.6% for all pupils.

Source: Department for Education