

Promoting social inclusion of children in a disadvantaged rural environment

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NOTE: The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the UK government.

Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) government welcomes the invitation to attend the EC Peer Review which is to take place in Budapest on the 27th and 28th May 2010. It further appreciates the privileged opportunity to hear about successful experience in other Member States and also to share with them the UK's long experience in developing models of best practice in relation to early childhood education and to the educational inclusion of Roma communities.¹

It is anticipated that the Peer Review will add considerably to the European knowledge bank in relation to strategies aimed at reducing the scale and incident and persistence of child poverty and in particular, the ubiquitous social exclusion of Roma. It is recognised by the UK government that a top priority for all Member States is to secure the best possible outcomes for all children and young people to ensure that they become responsible citizens and are enabled to lead happy, successful and prosperous personal and social lives. It is also sadly recognised that the situation of a majority of Roma in a pan European context is an indictment of European society as a whole and for this reason alone, must remain at the top of the European political and human rights agendas.

Finally, the UK government values the chance to learn more about the encouraging work in Hungary to eradicate child poverty and social exclusion and develop strategies for the integration of Roma with dignity and respect.

The host country, Hungary, is to be thanked for this kind invitation which the UK government has been only too pleased to accept.

¹ See notes later on the terminology currently used in the United Kingdom in relation to Roma communities.

Comments and observations on the host country and discussion papers

The two papers provide an excellent basis for the Peer Review both in terms of the 'bigger picture' human rights context and the exciting and encouraging description of innovative policy, provision and practice in and around the micro-region of Szécsény.

Firstly, the "Give Kids a Chance" paper provides a very interesting and full description of the programme in the micro-region of Szécsény with the very well researched contextual background in relation to children's rights, child poverty in Hungary and in the wider Europe. The Hungarian political response over the last decade, which has been based on a sound understanding of the social and economic consequences of inaction, and the recent development of a National Strategy 'Making Things Better for our Children' (2007-2032), has been impressive. The matrix concept of 'functional' and 'horizontal' priorities is particularly helpful as both a tool of analysis and as a prescription for informed action.

The background information leading to the selection of the micro-region provides very interesting data as well as evidence of the care and thoroughness with which the programme has been designed. The three objectives of the pilot project to reduce poverty, decrease social exclusion and improve the approach at all levels are very sound but each of them have extended dropdown menus of their own which all require coordinated actions.

This paper is very insightful and objective when it comes to describing the project's outcomes and the experience over the first three years of the programme. No doubt these will be areas for discussion at our meeting in May as too the benefits to the pilot project of the 'Sure Start Children Houses'. The UK team looks forward to making a number of contributions to this important area of our deliberations.

Secondly, the thorough and informative discussion paper drafted by José Manuel Fresno (Thematic expert) provides a crucially important backdrop to the Peer Review process and not least for the purposeful discussions and debates to be anticipated over the two days in Budapest. The 'bigger picture' European policy framework is vital to know about as it not only firmly sets the legal scene, but it also flags up the current importance of the issues of child poverty, children's rights and Roma social inclusion, to European and international political forums including the Commission and the European Parliament which have been particularly active in all of these fields.

The policy framework part of the paper provides details of an impressive array of research, published surveys and guidelines, in addition to national and international legislative actions relating to child poverty, and yet at the same time, a rather depressing statistical picture of child poverty and its seemingly endemic and ossified nature in many European societies. Given this descriptive context and the limited achievements of governments, including the UK, one should resist the temptation to feel subconsciously fortified by the biblical reference to the poor 'always being with you'. So the political actions and its rhetoric are in commendable high profile but the reality is something far less reassuring.

The European Union policy framework as described is equally impressive in relation to Roma inclusion. It is a wise observation of the Thematic Expert to have drawn attention to the increasing

sirens of alarm being expressed over the last ten or twenty years by a growing number of international organisations and evidenced by many hefty research publications.² The more recent serious actions taken by the European Commission in the form of major funding programmes and the development of political instruments and institutional mechanisms are to be applauded, such as, the two Roma summits and the establishment of the Integrated Platform for Roma Inclusion with the “10 Common Basic Principles for Roma Inclusion”. The articulated response by many Member States has been encouraging and not least by those countries which have joined up to the aims and objectives of the Decade of Roma Inclusion. However, the evidence would seem to suggest that the level of accretive action at ground level has been less than impressive despite the well intentioned adoption by many governments of comprehensive frameworks for Roma integration. Informed and frustrated observers within the Roma communities may be forgiven for replicating the biblical thought trail as alluded to in the paragraph above; that political actions and the impressive rhetoric of laudable pronouncements are in high profile but the reality of experience is something less than life-changing for far too many Roma children and their families. We are correctly reminded that the situation of Roma in many European countries has been worsening significantly for almost two decades and thus the importance of this Peer Review is further underlined.

The policy framework section leads very helpfully onto the related policy debate at European level which focuses in terms of child poverty on the prescriptions for action, on targets and timelines and on monitoring and outcome indicators. The debate witnesses the important linking of child poverty and social exclusion as a dimension of societal deprivation, “Tackling child poverty and breaking the inter-generational transmission of poverty and exclusion is an urgent matter”. It is welcome that the recent political attention to this important aspect of human rights has resulted in the debate giving way to the exercise of shared expertise and a growing consensus among the key stakeholders. The principles for action are clear and robustly sound.³

The section on the debate at European level provides a very comprehensive and well referenced picture of both the progress and the challenges facing the EU, the international players, Member States, and indeed, the Roma communities themselves.

This section of José Manuel Fresno’s discussion paper again rewards the reader with a succinct summary of the European comparative data on child poverty. We are reminded of the complex ingredients of child poverty and social exclusion and the essential intervention strategies which must target the youngest and most vulnerable children. This is why the successful focus, among others, on access to quality early childhood educational opportunities in the Hungarian (Szécsény) work, is so exciting.

The subsequent audit of the Hungarian pilot project work in the micro-region of Szécsény against the European policy debate is perhaps the most valuable aspect of the discussion paper given our forthcoming meeting of minds and experiences in Budapest in May. The work in the micro-region of Szécsény scores high marks against the recommended need for a holistic ‘bottom-up’ approach with the participation of all the stakeholders. More importantly, the active involvement of the deprived beneficiaries in both the definition of their prioritized needs, and the management of actions to address them is very sound. The work has also wisely benefited from previous Peer Reviews (e.g. Greece 2009) in stressing the importance of early childhood interventions to attack

² See footnotes 8-12 p.5 for just some examples of such publications.

³ See bullet points on page 8.

child poverty, social exclusion and limited educational opportunities. The model further illustrates the importance and value of decentralised programmes of social care and support, but also for the links to be maintained with respected national institutions as in this case, the Child Programme Office of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Of particular value in this audit is its frank honesty and this culture of debate bodes well for the Peer Review in Budapest at the end of May. It is clear that the constraints of time, political and administrative structures and levels of resources, are all determinants of retarded progress towards project goals. However, a list of worthy transferable benefits from the pilot project and the National Strategy is given and no doubt these will feature prominently in our discussions.⁴

The political process of 'scaling-up' successful practice is of crucial importance and especially in the light of so many successful pilot projects pioneered by the Roma Education Fund in partnership with many governments and NGOs. The scaling-up of the pilot project in Hungary is exceedingly praiseworthy and reflective of unusual political leadership. However, the reader can have some sympathy for the author of the Discussion Paper who is clearly frustrated by the seeming lack of empirical evidence that would allow an assessment to be made of the 'outcomes' of the work in terms of actual changes in life circumstances such as measurably improved levels of educational achievement, health, employment, family income and housing conditions.⁵

The description of the main elements of the policy helpfully details the comprehensive and sound aims and objectives of the pilot project in Szécsény and which have prescriptive relevance to many countries in Europe in regard to Roma and other marginalised and disadvantaged communities. Despite the laudable and comprehensive plans, operational constraints are reported to have corrupted or delayed many of the original good intentions.⁶ This is disappointing to the reader given the high expectations, but the analysis of the situation and the causal factors contributing to any 'underachievement' of the pilot project work, will add much to the 'meat' of our discussions in Budapest. The issues for debate are thoughtfully constructed in the final sector of the Discussion Paper and which will undoubtedly exercise intellectual excitement for the Peer Review meeting in May.

General Observations and Questions

The statistical information is in the main useful and interesting. However, there seems to be limited acknowledgement of the uncertainty about Roma population numbers on account of the ambivalent responses to census questions in relation to self-ascribed ethnic status. It is well known that Roma across Europe are understandably reluctant to voluntarily self-ascribe to Roma ethnic status on account of their experienced history of persecution and discrimination. Weak ethnic data though, is particularly unhelpful to policy design and implementation. Some historic evidence suggests that governments have not always wanted to know the number of Roma in their society and this irresponsibility, and or disinterest, has resulted in a pan European situation of where most states have ended up with both an official figure and an unofficial figure, with the latter always being significantly larger. This reality has immense implications for both Member States and the EC in terms of policy development and particularly funding programmes. Perhaps

⁴ See bullet points on page 15.

⁵ See 'Measuring results and impact' p.15.

⁶ See page 19.

the Peer Review should give some time to this issue with the aim of exploring strategies for boosting more confident ethnic self-ascription by Roma communities.

The documents make a distinction between Roma and migrants and although this is not confusing in the Hungarian context, it is to be remembered that in the enlarged EU the Roma represent the most significant group of migrants.⁷

It would seem widely accepted that given the absence of firm population statistics the estimates of Roma in the EU is between 10 and 15 million but irrespective of this uncertainty, they do even at the lower level represent the largest minority ethnic community.

Given the style and high quality of the Discussion Paper, it will undoubtedly be an issue of translation, but the subsequent minutes from the Peer Review meeting in Budapest should avoid references to Roma population age profiles and birth rates in the same context of "...justify the growing concern for Europe's Roma community". It could be misinterpreted in a negative way.

Roma population settlement patterns across Europe have traditionally sometimes been seen as very uneven and with historical concentrations said to be in Eastern and Central European states. This is a much less accurate picture today and caution needs to be exercised as both Southern (Spain and Italy) and Western (UK and Ireland) countries have very significant and growing Roma populations. Perhaps this is a topic that will be discussed in Budapest.

Linked to the point above, the educational misfortunes of Roma communities are replicated across most European Member States. Restricted access, segregation, poor institutional acceptance, poor attendance, marked underachievement and premature dropout, are all common features of Roma educational experiences. It would seem to be important, and in the interests of the Roma, to extend more accurately the territory of governmental responsibility for this state of affairs rather than try to isolate the guilt to governments only in Eastern and Central Europe.

The Discussion Paper is regularly punctuated by very telling and seminal comments. Inadvertently or by design, the gauntlet is skilfully laid down for the European Union as well as perhaps for this Peer Review, when the author says, "The challenge today for the EU is to gain effectiveness on the existing instruments and tools when addressing Roma issues". The high sounding and intimidatingly impressive list of such instruments and tools is given in a useful appendix. Their influence and effectiveness, however, will really be put to the test as most Member States grapple with the acknowledgement and containment of the race hatred that exists towards the Roma of Europe. Despite the EU Race Directive and other national and international legislative frameworks, a majority of Roma all over Europe are still daily experiencing discrimination across all the Lisbon sectoral fields including education, housing, health, social security and employment. The EU and other international human rights and anti-discrimination machinery had better be seen to work in changing the everyday lives of Roma families, as otherwise, it will just be a bureaucratic legal sham and will mean nothing to the very people for whom it should mean everything. Interestingly enough, the two papers seem to shy away from referring to '**racism**' and instead use less threatening terms and phrases such as "an ethnic minority disregarded by the majority society". Who is being protected here?

⁷ See most recent report from the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) on Roma Migration. "The situation of Roma EU citizens moving to and settling in other EU Member States", November 2009.

The two papers are commendable for their clear position and commitment to sound and unbiased assessment and analysis. The honest and objective stance of the papers is welcomed and there are very clear efforts to ensure that prescribed policy, provision and practice do not explicitly or implicitly 'blame the victim'. However, it is to be regretted that they do not give sufficient emphasis to the history of Roma. The unjust and chronically disadvantaged situation of a majority of Roma in modern day Europe can only be fully understood and appreciated when the shameful history of what has been perpetrated by governments and non-Roma societies against these community for over five centuries, is finally acknowledged. The chequered experience of the Roma over time has included persecution, banishment, enslavement and repeated attempts at genocide. The history of Roma in the United Kingdom, like most other European societies, betrays a similarly shameful record of racist abuse, neglect and discrimination from the acts of genocide in the sixteenth century to the calculated abuse of human rights by it colluding with the Czech government between 1997/2001 to specifically screen out Roma from taking flights to the UK at Prague airport.

There are a number of people, both Roma and non-Roma who would argue that the current treatment of the Roma in Europe is tantamount to 'genocide by default'. We know that life expectancy is some 12 years less than the European average and that infant mortality rates are 21 times higher. We also know that many families are forced to live in dangerously unhealthy environments with little or no security of tenure. The last century witnessed the policy of forced sterilization of Roma women and the taking of Roma children from their families. More recently, we have seen an alarming number of racist murders of Roma children and adults and the growth of far right political parties which foster 'anti-Gypsism' as a way to target Roma for racist abuse with the policy advocacy of the 'final solution'. Some elements of the mass media only pour oil on the fire. If the encouraging and innovative actions of the work in Szécsény (and many other places) are **not** seen to happen with scale and urgency across Member States (including the UK), then the UN criteria for genocide become uncomfortably close. Perhaps this is also a topic that could be discussed in Budapest.

Given that the two papers, and particularly the Discussion Paper, draw attention to the crucial importance of holistic policy responses to the eradication of child poverty and social exclusion, but with an expressed disappointment about the breath and pace of actual change on the ground, it would perhaps be purposeful at the Peer Review to discuss issues of policy 'distortion' on account of the social and political status of the main beneficiary group(s). Such a debate might include a consideration of the tools necessary for effective monitoring and evaluation including proportionality and pace of response to identified need and the scrutiny of governmental strategies that aim to distance themselves from the politically unpopular policy area of Roma beneficiaries.

Although the papers acknowledged the value to European society of the more general inclusion of Roma as a force for cultural enrichment, there was scant comment about the importance of the Romani language but this may be part of a smaller dropdown menu deployed in the project's policies for educational inclusion.

The UK context

Early Years Educational policy, provision and practice in the UK

Provision and practice with the under fives and their families in the UK is informed by recognition of a significant gap in development and achievement between those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families and other children of the same age. **Please note, however, that the following describes UK Government policy up to May 2010; future policy may change following the change in Government as a result of the UK General Election which took place on 6th May.**

Gypsies and Travellers have lower health status than the general population. Mothers are less likely to receive adequate ante- and postnatal support; there are higher levels of infant mortality and more child accidents and illness. Many of the health problems are related to the adverse environmental conditions in which families have to live, the difficulties they have in accessing sustained healthcare and receiving up-to-date health advice and information, the stresses of forced moves, and the racism and discrimination they experience (University of Sheffield, *The Health Status of Gypsies & Travellers in England*, 2004). There is a lack of early identification of special educational needs. These may not be identified and supported until a child is of school age, by which time intervention may already be less effective.

The children do not always start school as early as others, or with any pre-school educational experience. In addition, the barriers that families face in accessing education often compromise consistent attendance and children's well-being. There is often an assumption that a particular service is known about and accessible, and a lack of recognition that families may have no way of knowing and no way of accessing the service on offer.

In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) provides a holistic broad-based measure of progress for children as they move into their second year of statutory education. National data collected between 2004 and 2008 suggests that there is a significant gap between the achievement of those children who are ascribed to the ethnic categories of Gypsy or Roma and Travellers of Irish Heritage and children from other groups for whom this information is collected. There is national guidance for teachers and others working with these groups, aimed at helping reduce that gap.

A key strand of government policy to combat child poverty and disadvantage in England has been the development of Sure Start Children's Centres. Almost every community in England now has a local children's centre, with over 3,600 centres established. Sure Start Children's Centres are part of the local system of universal children's services, providing easy access to a range of community health services, parenting and family support, integrated early education and childcare, and links to training and employment opportunities for families with children under the age of five. Children's centres are seen as a key mechanism for improving outcomes for young children while reducing inequalities between the poorest children and their peers.

The typical children's centre provides a single location for parents where they can find:

- childcare or playgroups for young children;
- social care functions of the local authority relating to young children, parents and prospective parents;
- health services relating to young children, parents and prospective parents;
- employment support for parents and prospective parents;
- the local authority's information, advice and assistance service relating to childcare and other services and facilities relevant to young children and their families.

The centre also acts as a base and source of support for other providers of early years services in the area such as nurseries, playgroups and childminders.

Children's centres are funded as part of government funding for local council services, and have recently been given formal legal status. They are seen as a universal service, open and to be used by all families with children under five, but with many services targeted at the most disadvantaged. The funding takes account of this, with overall budgets reflecting the level of disadvantage in the area served by each centre. Within the broad framework outlined above the detail of services is determined locally, through a combination of the local council and an advisory board representing the local community. The intention is that the way in which resources are used reflects local needs and priorities.

Sure Start Children's Centres have increasingly recognised the need to ensure that their services reach Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families. In some areas partnerships between local authority support services for such families and the children's centres have been formed, and projects initiated. Outreach services form a key part of children's centre services. Outreach can be seen as a means of delivering a service directly to a family who appear to have no other means of access, and providing a service tailored to the particular needs of that family; also as a route to bringing families into existing locally provided services. In most cases outreach combines these two approaches.

There is evidence of families from these communities remaining excluded from many mainstream services and opportunities. An 'open door' policy in itself is not enough: an institution or system and the service it provides is in effect closed to anyone who does not know it and has no relationship with it. Through outreach a children's centre can build up trust with such families, supporting and encouraging their use of mainstream services as they work with families in their own homes. In this way families are encouraged to access pre-school/nursery provision, health services and employment services, all seen as part of the route to combating disadvantage and poverty, and closing the gap in achievement.

A five year evaluation of children's centres has recently been initiated by the government. This will look in particular at the outcomes achieved by a sample of centres, tracking both babies and older under fives over the five year period.

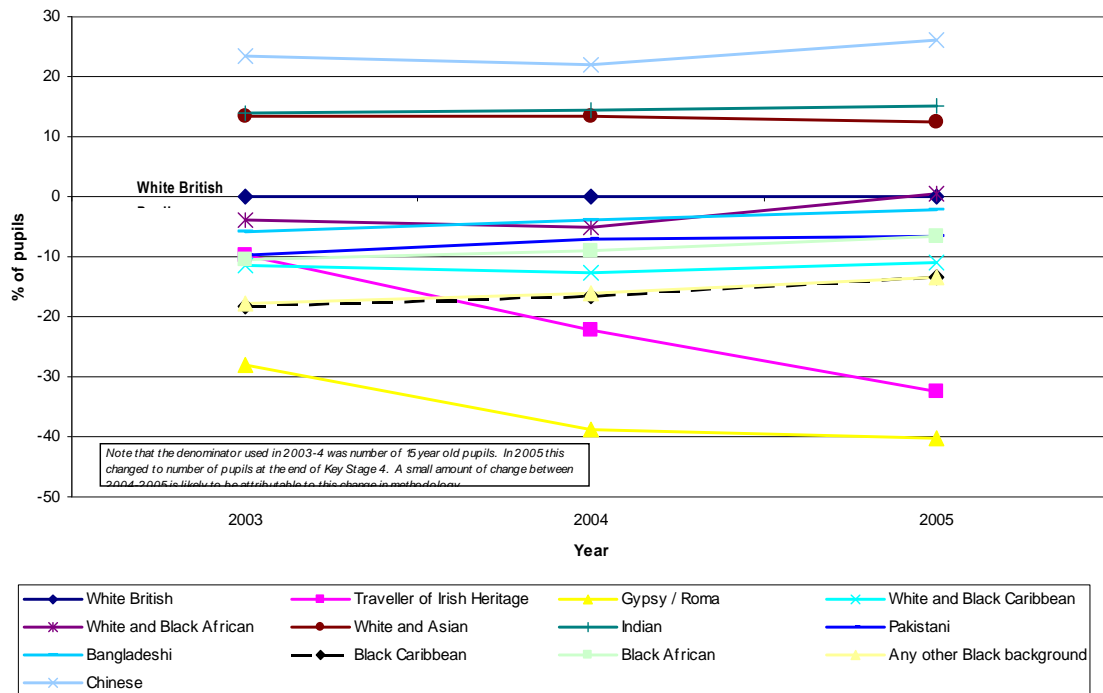
Roma, Gypsy and Traveller communities in the UK

The Roma were reported to have first come to Britain around 1530. Many have maintained a nomadic lifestyle to the present day. In the Tudor period the Roma were known as Egyptians and the term 'Gypsy' is a derivation of this term. Many Roma in the UK still prefer to be known as 'Gypsies'. In recent years the UK has seen a significant influx of Roma migrants from Eastern and Central Europe. There are also significant numbers of 'Travellers of Irish heritage' and many of whom are also semi-nomadic. However, the vast majority of Roma, Gypsies and Travellers live in housing. It is estimate that there are near to 100,000 Gypsies and Travellers who live in caravans and may be nomadic at certain times of the year. In addition, it is estimated that up to 350,000 Gypsies and Travellers live in houses. The Roma with a more recent history of post-communist migration are estimated to exceed 400,000.

In terms of educational policy, provision and practice, other groups are included. These are Fairground/Showpeople, Circus families, New Travellers and Bargees.

All of these groups of children have rights to education and a very significant number now access primary education and the numbers attending pre-school educational opportunities is slowly growing. The numbers transferring to secondary schools is disappointing but again slowly improving. However, an increasing number of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families opt to educate their children at home and this is a legal right. For many children, however, there are still hindrances to access to education (approximately 20% of nomadic families have no where legal to stop and are frequently victims to national policies of eviction from unauthorised encampments.) and to regular patterns of attendance. Educational outcomes in the form of levels of attainment for a majority of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people are also very disappointing.

Performance of minority ethnic pupils relative to White British pupils at GCSE (% achieving 5+A*-C) from 2003-2005



Most local authorities have a Roma (GRT) Education Support Service with specialist teachers and other professional workers including GR&T learning support assistants. These teams support families, pupils, and schools in a wide range of ways including the provision of training and family/community outreach and advocacy.

In 2008, the Department for Children, Schools and Families introduced a national Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month and this has been very successful in raising the profile of the communities in a positive way, in making school curricular more inclusive of the history, culture and language of GRT communities, and in boosting ethnic pride and confidence in self-ascription. The month of June each year is now designated as the GRTHM and it has been embraced by both families and schools. One parent said, "For the first time in our history in this country the government has finally said we have a culture worth celebrating".

Current government educational policy is targeted at raising levels of attainment, improving ethnic self ascription, and ensuring that local authorities provide well targeted support services that are fully inclusive of GR&T communities. Concerns still exist around standards of attainment, premature dropout at the secondary stage and a creeping segregation in a small number of primary schools.

Biographical details of the UK team at the Peer Review

Michael Hiscox

Michael currently works for Together for Children, the agency contracted by the British Government to oversee and support the development of Sure Start Children's Centres across England. He has been involved with the national Sure Start Programme and children's centres from their start, leading on early years in Birmingham where some of the first centres were established, and subsequently overseeing the development of children's centres in a number of regions. In Together for Children he leads on work with families and has written toolkits and other guidance for children's centres. He is currently a member of a number of national groups, including the board managing outreach training in children's centres.

Michael's previous experience covers primary, secondary and higher education, both as a teacher and manager. Before moving into local government, he both studied and taught at a number of British universities, including Cambridge, Nottingham and Bath, where he was a Research Fellow. He has wide experience of work with disadvantaged groups and child poverty, particularly in inner city areas. During his time in local government, he has led on school organisation, special needs and early years. This has included the management of teams responsible for Roma and Traveller families. He has been keen to ensure strong links between specialists working with such families and wider provision for the under fives.

Arthur Ivatts

Arthur worked initially as a teacher and youth leader. Following a higher degree in anthropology, which focused on the Gypsies/Roma in England, he became involved with the early efforts to secure education for Gypsy and Traveller children.

After some years working within the voluntary NGO sector concerned with Gypsies/Roma and Travellers, he joined HM Inspector of Schools in England and soon became the HMI with national responsibility for the education of Gypsy/Roma and Traveller children. He held this post, together with responsibility for the education of asylum seekers and refugees, until 2003 when he decided to do consultancy work for government departments and intergovernmental organisations.

He has recently been involved in Roma/Gypsy related projects in Bulgaria, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania. In 2003/4 he worked with a small research team on a report for the European Commission in relation to Roma and EU enlargement "*The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged European Union*" – EU November 2004). He is also working on a number of priority issues for the UK Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) concerned with the education of Gypsy/Roma and Traveller children. In 2004 he was awarded the OBE for his services to education.

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