



An Era of Change: Revolutionising Tomorrow

Traveller Movement Annual Conference Report 2024

January 2025

About the Traveller Movement

The Traveller Movement (TM) is a leading national charity committed to the fulfilment of Human Rights for ethnic minority Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people. The Traveller Movement's mission is to develop a platform and voice for Travellers, working in solidarity with Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities to achieve equality through self-determination and proactive participation in influencing and shaping policy.

Contents

| | | | |
|--|---|--|----|
| Acknowledgements | 2 | Workshop Two: A New Dawn: From Retribution to Reform – Innovating Criminal Justice Practices..... | 10 |
| Introduction | 3 | Workshop Three: Empowering Her: Advancing Gender Equality for Women and Girls | 11 |
| Keynote Speech | 4 | Workshop Four: Who Do You Think You Are?: Evolving Identities on the Road Less Travelled | 12 |
| Panel One: Charting the Way Forward: Empowering Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers under the New Government..... | 5 | Conclusion | 13 |
| Panel Two: Charting the Way Forward: Empowering Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers under the New Government..... | 7 | Conference evaluation in numbers | 14 |
| Workshop One: Shaping Tomorrow’s Education: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities..... | 9 | | |

Acknowledgments

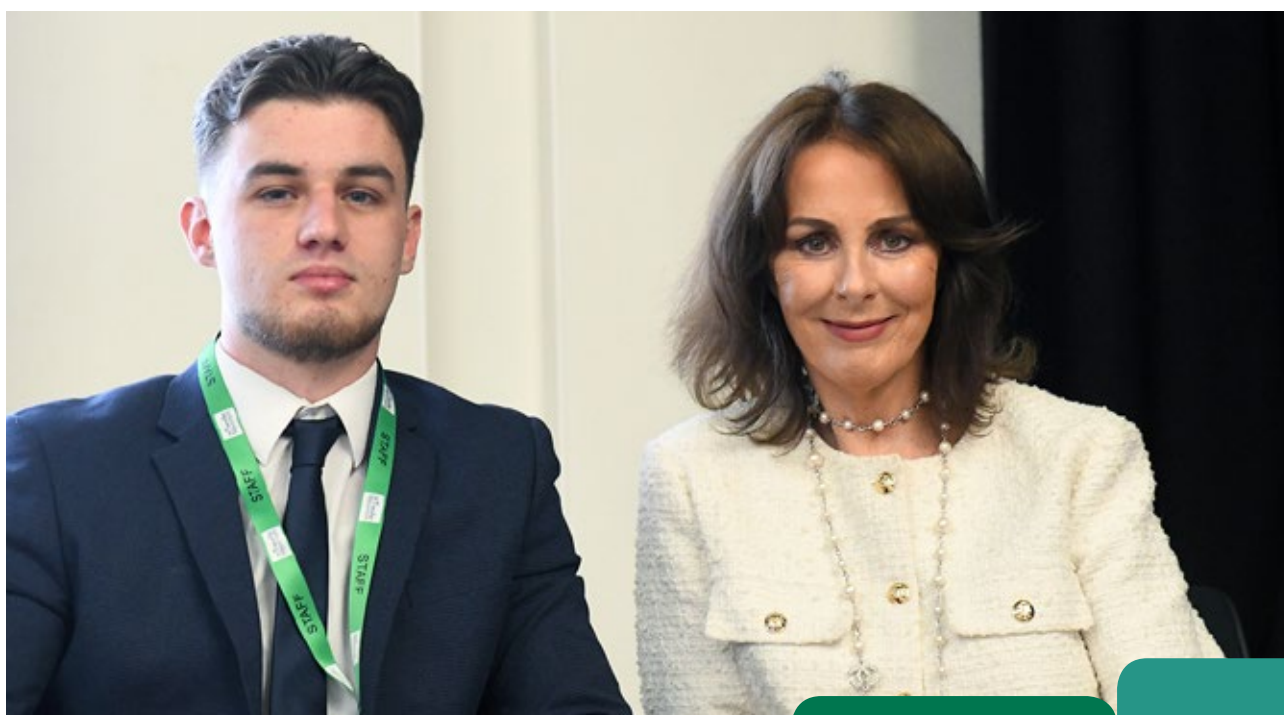
The Traveller Movement would like to thank:

The Traveller Movement would like to thank all our speakers, our workshop panellists and participants and in would like to give special thanks to:

Our Co-Chairs Pauline Melvin Anderson OBE and Shaun Mongan for expertly hosting the conference. Jacob Sakil, Lead for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion for the Youth Justice Board, for his keynote address.

Our panel speakers: Dr Debbie Weekes-Bernards, Dr Thomas McCann, Simon Hood, Mick Cash, Jeffrey Greenidge, John McCarthy, Betty Billington-Smith, Leanne Green, Lourdes Green, Charlie Doherty, Olivia Morrison and Sarah Dunne.

The wonderful community members who contributed to all our discussions throughout the day.





Introduction

The UK is entering a new era, one the Traveller Movement hopes will bring policy changes that will substantially improve in the lives of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities. The Traveller Movements 2024 conference aimed to bring together key voices who could lead the way towards the new dawn of policymaking for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities.

Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities face multiple interconnecting disadvantages which have worsened since the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing cost-of-living crisis. Poor access to services, lack of access to adequate education, over-policing, overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, and an unfolding mental health crisis are among the barriers these communities face. Coupled with the persistent discrimination faced by the communities across every facet of their lives there is no doubt that Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities face systemic challenges in the UK.

The communities also face chronic democratic underrepresentation, with their inequalities often ignored by policymakers and labelled as unimportant. Often left out of conversations about systemic racial discrimination and pushed to the side in broader equality and improvement initiatives, their unique challenges and needs remain unmet.

The Traveller Movements 2024 Conference brought together policymakers, passionate advocates, key stakeholders and inspiring community members to collaborate on revolutionary policy solutions which will break down barriers and tackle the multiple, interconnecting crises facing Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities. This conference looked at the new opportunities brought with a new Government and how we can grasp this moment to bring about a real change for the communities we serve.

Throughout the conference from panel discussions to workshops there was a focus on collaborating across sectors and power makers to reshape the political landscape for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities. This conference put community voice at the centre of the discussions and explored deeply what it means to be a member of these diverse communities in the modern day. Throughout the day there was a focus on what real political leadership looks like and how that leadership can champion community voices.

This report encapsulates the pivotal discussions, insights, and initiatives from the 2024 Traveller Movement's Annual Conference, showcasing how powerful the communities' voices can be when they are combined for one goal; change.

Keynote Speech: Jacob Sakil



Our keynote speaker this year was Jacob Sakil who serves as the youngest member of the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and the Lead for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion for the YJB. Jacob spoke about his connection to the Irish Traveller and Romani (Gypsy) communities in Lewisham and about the common experiences of marginalised groups within the United Kingdom's criminal justice system. He spoke specifically about the need to collaborate across marginalised groups to ensure a just system and future for all.

Central to his address was highlighting the stark disparities within the criminal justice system for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller young people. In particular, Jacob spoke about the underlining issues which lead to these disparities, speaking about the institutional racism which is present in education, the courts, the care system, and the wider criminal justice system. There was a focus within Jacob's keynote address on the influence of wider societal racism on the experiences of the communities and need for a holistic and whole system approach to tackling this racism, both in the criminal justice system and outside of it.

Jacobs emphasised the core mission of the YJB to tackle the over-representation of ethnic minorities within the youth justice system. He highlighted the work the YJB does to change the narrative within the youth justice system and to promote effective practices across the sector. Pointing to key reports released by the YJB over the last decade which looked at disparities in sentencing and remand and its commitment to releasing annual statistics and data which highlight disparities. The YJBs vision is one of a justice system which has a Child First approach which sees children as children treats them fairly and helps them to build on their strengths so they can make a constructive contribution to society. Only a system which centres the child can ever truly prevent crime and create safer communities.

Core to Jacobs keynote was the need for a collaborative response to youth offending which focuses on bringing together all strands of the youth justice sector to tackle disproportionality. He emphasised in particular the need for an upstream approach to tackling youth offending, investing in education, mental health supports, addressing social exclusion and providing better opportunities for marginalised young people. Only by properly investing in the lives and futures of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller young people will we stop the flow of these young people into the criminal justice system.

In his speech Jacob focused on the need to reform the current Pre-Sentence Report system, highlighting the biased and discriminatory language which can be found in many of the PSRs given to Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller young people. Emphasising the damaging effect these biases can have not just on the sentencing of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller young people but also on their wellbeing and treatment while in the justice system. There must be an emphasis on the importance of using language helpfully and on understanding the dangers of reinforcing stereotypes through language. There is a real danger in language which erroneously links ethnicity to criminality. He highlighted the urgent need for reforms and tackling these biases.

Jacobs addressed in particular emphasised the importance of action rather than talk to tackle disparities. There must be a commitment from government and all sectors to continue gathering disaggregated data which will inform robust policies. A focus on spotlighting and holding up examples of good practice and successful practices in reducing racial disparity.

Overall, the core message of Jacobs address surrounded the urgent need for collective action and the shared responsibility in building a fairer more just system for all young people, in particular those most marginalised. There must be strong political leadership, in government both local and national to work together for a fairer future for all children.

Panel One: Charting the Way Forward: Empowering Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers under the New Government

This session focused on outlining key actions and a strategic plan needed from the new government. From dismantling barriers to meaningful inclusion to implementing targeted interventions, we advocate for policies that prioritise Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers. Our esteemed panellists discussed the urgent need for joined-up thinking and genuine representation at decision-making tables. This panel advocated that together, we can articulate a vision for a future where Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers thrive, empowered by policies that uphold dignity, equality, and justice for all.

Speakers:

Dr Debbie Weekes-Bernard, London's Deputy Mayor for Communities and Social Justice;

Dr Thomas McCann, Founder, Travellers Counselling Service;

Simon Hood, Researcher at The Runnymede Trust;

Mick Cash, Former General Secretary of the RMT Union and a Ward Councillor;

Jeffrey Greenidge, Director of Diversity and Governance of the Association of Colleges

Dr Debbie Weekes-Bernard spoke about the power of discussing racial justice and gathering in solidarity to tackle racial disparities in our world. She spoke about how the London Mayors Office is committed to making a fairer London for all communities. Debbie issued a call to action to ensure that data collected and published by the Metropolitan Police is inclusive of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller ethnicities.

Dr Thomas McCann spoke about his experiences as an Irish Traveller in Ireland, his journey to education and the importance of dismantling discrimination within the education system. He spoke about his experiences as a young Irish Traveller being discriminated against in Irish schools, and how teachers often discouraged him from becoming better educated. Building on this personal experience he emphasised the need for services to coproduce culturally appropriate services for all communities. Thomas spoke of the need for providers to provide bespoke community led services to ensure that communities feel served and respected.

Bringing his perspective as a researcher with the Runnymede Trust, Simon Hood spoke about the failure of the racial justice sector to properly consider the experiences and disenfranchisement of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities. He spoke about the research the Runnymede Trust is looking to do and how that research is going to be collaborative with the sector and amplify existing research and good practice. Simon also highlighted the importance of ensuring the NHS Data Dictionary becomes inclusive of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller ethnicities.



Mick Cash lent his perspective to the panel both as a community member and as former General Secretary of RMT Union. Speaking about his experience through education and through National Rail. He spoke about the importance of giving young people real opportunities, such as those he aims to create within National Rail for young Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people. Service providers must open doors for groups who are marginalised and left behind, it is essential for young people to have access to real pathways to success. He emphasised the need for the communities to meet service providers halfway and vice versa, that there must be commitment from both to work together to forge a better future for community members.

Jeffrey Greenidge spoke about the work the Association of Colleges has done to bridge attainment gaps for ethnic minorities. He spoke of his hope that systemic discrimination, racism and inequality can be tackled but that it requires solidarity. This solidarity must be between communities but also from institutions who have the power to exercise solidarity to drive change.

In conclusion, the panel felt that there was a need for strong political leadership to tackle the disparities experienced by Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities in the UK.



*“Excellent day.
Well managed,
great speakers
and some inspiring
young people”*

CEO of Irish in Britain

Panel Two: Charting the Way Forward: Empowering Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers under the New Government

This panel discussion delved into the rich tapestry of identity, evolving dynamics of cultural heritage, and equality among Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities. From the diaspora that spans continents to the evolving roles and gender dynamics within these communities, we explored the complex relationships with mainstream society and the internal conflicts faced in defining cultural identity. What does it mean to be a “real” Romani (Gypsy), Roma, or Traveller in today’s world? How do we navigate the complexities of cultural preservation amidst changing social landscapes? This session addressed these critical questions, focusing on how embracing change can strengthen cultural identity rather than dilute it.

Panellists:

John McCarthy, (Chair) – Traveller Movement Trustee

Thomas McCann, Founder, Travellers Counselling Service

Betty Billington Smith, CEO, Kushti Bok

Leanne Green, Irish Traveller Advocate

Lourdes Green, Women’s Research and Development Officer TM

Charlie Doherty, Student at St Mary’s University and former Traveller Movement Youth Engagement and Development Officer

Olivia Morrison, TM, Head of Partnerships and Advocacy

Sarah Dunne, Teacher and Irish Traditional Musician

This panel discussion was a very personal discussion about identity and belonging within specifically Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller communities, there was an acknowledgement that although the later workshop included the Roma voice this panel discussion did not.

There was an acknowledgment that there is a need to preserve the culture while also having tough conversations about what it means to be a community member. There was a distinct feeling that there is more to the communities than the way someone looks or speaks, being a Romani (Gypsy) or Irish Traveller is about your family, your heritage, music, history, culture and experiences.



There was a focus on the importance of blood, family ties and your family name. Panellists spoke about the common first conversation with other Travellers where they ask 'who owns you' or 'who are your people' and the connection felt by mutual family ties. This speaks to the relational aspect of Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller identity. It is the connection to the wider community that is often of paramount importance to community members, specifically family connection and connection to the wider family unit.

Many of the panellists felt they had stepped away from what would be seen as the traditional life, by either getting a degree, not getting married young, or working in a different industry. Leading an untraditional life can often feel isolating for many Romani (Gypsies) and Irish Travellers, with many feeling like once they diverge paths even a little they cannot claim their heritage.

However, panellists strongly felt that Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller identity goes beyond very small aspects of your life such as your work, the way you speak or look. It is about heritage, language, history, music, storytelling and many things beyond what a stereotypical community member looks like.

Panellists felt strongly that broadening identity beyond what a 'stereotypical Traveller' is will allow for a breaking down of barriers both within and outside of the communities.

There was a very strong feeling that life experience is core to the Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller identity, often those experiences being that of discrimination. Many panellists shared stories of how they were treated by the wider community, by teachers and by service providers. This shared experience of discrimination often strengthens those relational bonds between community members as they feel a strong sense of commonality and safety within the communities.

The panel also discussed a history of advocacy for their communities as a strong bond they share with their wider communities. There is a history of championing the rights of other Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller community members which is a core aspect of why they feel so close to their communities. Many panellists expressed pride that through them achieving a higher education they can now give back to the communities who gave them so much. Using their education to challenge discrimination and to provide strong role models for other Romani (Gypsies) and Irish Travellers, particularly young women.

Claiming your heritage and being proud of your past was an important facet of the discussion. Many panellists spoke about the challenges they faced when wishing to claim their heritage proudly and how often they received push back from the wider community saying they 'weren't a real Traveller/Gypsy'. There was a feeling that it is important to be able to claim and be proud of your heritage and your families heritage. That this will break down boundaries for other community members and show the wide breadth of experiences that Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller people can have. Having pride in Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller ethnicity should be something to celebrate.

In conclusion, this panel discussion provided a deep exploration of the multifaceted identity, cultural heritage, and equality within Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller communities. It examined the evolving relationship with mainstream society, while also addressing the internal struggles of defining cultural identity. Key questions were raised about what it means to be a "real" Romani (Gypsy) or Irish Traveller in today's world and how cultural preservation can coexist with social change. Ultimately, the session highlighted that embracing change can fortify, rather than diminish, cultural identity.



"Really great conversations in both panels and workshop"

Project Manager at Rural Media

Workshop One: Shaping Tomorrow's Education: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities

Chair: Olivia Hammond (TM)

TM Lead: Shaun Mongan and Olivia Hammond

Panellists:

Clare Cruise, (Southwark Law Centre)

Philippa Sadgrove, (Co-op Academies)

Sam May, (Romani Gypsy Teaching Assistant, Kent)

Workshop One focused on the Traveller Movements education priorities' and dove deep into a number of important topics. It brought together stakeholders to address key barriers that impact the engagement, retention and attainment of young Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller students. Discussions highlighted cultural differences, systemic challenges and the importance of trusted relationships between families and schools. Particular emphasis was placed on special education needs and disabilities (SEND), exclusions, and sex/relationship education. The workshop aimed to identify actionable steps to improve outcomes and allow for increased inclusion for these marginalised communities.

Key takeaways

Trusted Relationships and Engagement

Trusted community/staff members significantly improve engagement between schools and families, enabling parents to feel comfortable with school activities, such as trips and sensitive topics like sex education. Open communication fosters trust and allows for tailored approaches to sensitive issues, such as girls learning about periods or broader sex education. Having community members serve as role models—especially women—encourages students to see value in education and future employment. Safe spaces where children can positively discuss their culture help them feel comfortable embracing their identity.

Cultural Differences

Cultural barriers affect engagement, such as mistrust of institutions, low expectations for formal education, and hesitation around mainstream societal norms. Challenges include the lack of exposure to structured schooling, language barriers, and societal attitudes towards Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities.

Institutionally Coercive Exclusions

High rates of exclusions among Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller students reflect systemic issues. Families withdrawing children due to bullying, discrimination, or perceived hostility from schools. Lack of sustained engagement during the transition from primary to secondary education. Low teacher expectations and insufficient cultural competency training further alienate Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller students. Teachers resort to applying reduced timetables to students rather than actively working with them to keep them in the classroom.

Flexible Learning Models

The transition from primary to secondary school is a critical point where many students are lost, a one size fits all model to education does not serve Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children. Bridging this gap with more flexible learning models could be beneficial. Mixed timetables (part-time in class, part-time online or home-based learning) could help students who struggle with full-time school attendance. Online learning, even part-time, could have been especially beneficial during the pandemic but remains underutilised.



Workshop Two: A New Dawn: From Retribution to Reform – Innovating Criminal Justice Practices

Chair: Mark Watson, (TM Trustee)

TM Lead: Grace Preston

Panellists:

Mark Blake, (Criminal Justice Alliance)

Katrina Ffrench, (Police Independent Scrutiny and Oversight Board for the Police Race Action Plan)

Kathuna Tsintsadze, (Zahid Mubarek Trust)

This workshop focused on methods to improve the criminal justice system for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people. The discussion underscored the need for community engagement, legislative reform, and systemic change. There must be a wider acknowledgment of the harm caused to those who are in the criminal justice system experiencing discriminatory practices and institutional racism. The participants highlighted the need to tackle race discrimination as a fundamental safeguarding and trust issue. The discussion underscored the need for community engagement, legislative reform, and systemic change.

Key takeaways

Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022

The Act has done untold damage to relationships between the police and Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller communities, although whether its powers are regularly used is unclear. The Act has been declared incompatible with human rights legislation, but it is unclear whether it will be withdrawn by government, the Traveller Movement should focus on pressuring the government to repeal the Act.

Use of Powers and Police

The misuse of police powers traumatises communities and damages relationships between communities and the police. Lack of consistent data monitoring means the experiences of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities are often hidden. This unique experience must be brought to the fore and tackled.

Prioritising Lived Experience

It is essential to centre lived experience especially in work on prisons. Prisoners experiences are so often hidden and not centred in conversations about prison reform. All work in the criminal justice system should be shining a light on those with lived experience.

Collaborative Cross-Sector Working

Solidarity and collective action across ethnic groups and sectors are crucial in challenging systemic racism and holding the criminal justice system accountable for meaningful change.



Workshop Three: Empowering Her: Advancing Gender Equality for Women and Girls

Chair: Bridget McCarthy, (TM Trustee)

TM Lead: Aoife Delaney

Panellists:

Annalise Corcoran, (TM)

Lizzie Brothers, (Plan International)

Hayley Dean, (Young Women's Trust)

Florie Chiriac, (Surrey Modern Slavery & Organised Immigration Crime Unit)

The focus of this workshop was to reflect on how far gender equality has come over the last decade of TMs work and beyond, what areas have had the most successes and where we can go from here. Reflecting on these successes the participants wanted to identify the policy priorities for the TM Women's Empowerment Network (WEN) and the next WEN annual review.

Key takeaways

Increase pathways to employment

Develop flexible and unconventional educational and employment pathways for Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller women, including mentorship opportunities, to close educational attainment gaps. Employers must tackle racism and barriers to hiring or self-identifying within the workforce for community members.

Increase awareness of healthy relationships, boundaries and women's rights

Developing tailored and community-led resources by service providers which tackle issues such as healthy relationships, boundaries, and women's rights, building on the positive influence of role models, particularly survivors of domestic abuse and violence.

Mental health service provision

Provide training for frontline mental health professionals to better understand the experiences and needs of these communities.



Workshop Four: Who Do You Think You Are?: Evolving Identities on the Road Less Travelled

Chair: John McCarthy, (TM Trustee)

TM Lead: Olivia Morrison, (TM)

Panellists:

Lourdes Green, (TM)

Liza Mortimer, (Traveller Times)

Crina Morteau, (Luton Roma Trust)

Sarah Dunne, (Educator)

This workshop furthered the conversation about identity from earlier in the day, this conversation focused specifically on how Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller identity has evolved and should evolve in the modern day. The conversation emphasised the importance of cultural pride, education, and community support. The participants underscored the role of heritage in fostering identity and the challenges of maintaining cultural practices, such as language, were also discussed. The group stressed the need for collective action, education, and archiving cultural history to combat negative stereotypes and promote community resilience.

Key takeaways

Collective Action and Advocacy

There must be a focus on collective action within the communities and with other disadvantaged and excluded communities to address shared experiences of exclusion, racism, poverty, and inequality.

Fostering Cultural Pride

Delivering workshops and educational programs to foster cultural pride and knowledge among younger generations.

Creating Positive Representation

Tackling instances of 'outsiders' misrepresenting the communities and instead focusing on community members shining a light on the positive and true representation of the experiences, histories and traditions of the communities.

Archiving Cultural History

There is a need to begin properly maintaining and archiving history to combat negative stereotypes and promote community resilience.



Conclusion

An Era of Change underscored the need for innovative policymaking, joined up thinking and strong political leadership to finally tackle the disparities faced by Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities. There was a call across the board for solidarity and stronger collaborative work between other disadvantaged and excluded communities including minority groups, to address shared experiences of exclusion, racism, poverty, and inequality.

Inequalities in education were front and centre of discussion at the conference, particularly the discrimination faced by Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children while in schools. There was a strong feeling that political leadership and a stronger Departmental stance was needed to properly tackle these disparities in attainment, attendance and in inclusive education policies.

It was strongly felt throughout all discussions about identity, in both panel and workshop, that there needed to be further work on this area particularly to foster cultural pride, education, and community support. The group stressed the need for collective action, education, and archiving cultural history to combat negative stereotypes and promote community resilience.

Ethnic data collection and disaggregation remained a common concern.

In conclusion, the 2024 conference focused on grasping onto the new dawn of political leadership in the UK. The conversations highlighted the power of collective action and lived experience to tackle the greatest challenges facing Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities.



“Loved the focus on identity; found it informative, eye-opening and interesting. It touched the heart as well as the head.”

Associate Vicar and Chaplain from Margaret Clitherow Trust



Conference evaluation in numbers



126
Attendees



Whole event
76%

said the event was excellent



Venue facilities
64%

said the venue facilities were excellent and 30% good



Food/ Refreshments
67%

said they were excellent



Quality of workshops

61%

said the quality of the workshops were excellent and 27% said good



Meeting expectations

64%

said the event was excellent



Organisation on the day

79%

said organisation on the day was excellent



Subjects presented

64%

said the subject presented were excellent and only 3% said they were average



Booking process

64%

said the booking process was excellent and 27% said it was good





“Really stimulating and interesting event. Especially the panel of people from GRT groups. The education workshop was very interesting. Met some people it will be useful to connect with.”

Participation Lead from Coram



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 The Traveller Movement

 Traveller Movement

SAVE THE DATE

Our next Annual
Conference

Will be on 20th
November 2025,
Lambeth Town Hall.

For more information about the
Traveller Movement's Annual Conference
contact our Operations team at
officeadmin@travellermovement.org.uk

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