

## **Building trusting relationships with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities using Signs of Safety**

### **What is this guidance about?**

This practice guidance seeks to share some ideas for practitioners such as teachers, health visitors, social workers and early years workers who work with Gypsy, Roma and Travellers of Irish heritage, particularly when they are settled and rarely travel as they are often 'invisible' because most are white and their ethnicity may not be obvious, but they are recognised and protected under The Equality Act, 2000 which amended The Race Relations Act, 1976 (UK legislation). The guidance is based on direct work with families in the London Borough of Haringey (UK) in its use of Signs of Safety. It outlines ways in which relationship and better communications can be enhanced and build bridges where trust and suspicion are ever present.

A key Signs of Safety principle is to foster positive relationships between families and professionals and between professionals. This is true for all families and the building of trusting relationships with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities is especially so for communities who feel outside and excluded from mainstream services such as education, and if there is contact with child protection service feel they are targeted for reasons of prejudice, racism and discrimination. Turning suspicion into trust is never easy and takes time. These communities have faced persecution for hundreds of years, and many are still constantly on the move, making sustained support difficult to offer. Haringey has been innovative in its approach to finding creative ways for working with Traveller communities, however the improving ways of improving the educational outcomes of Traveller communities remains a challenge and this is against a backdrop where 80% of adult Travellers are illiterate and those who can fill in forms to ask for help are often too scared to do so.

The motivation for pulling together this guidance comes out of work with a 'stuck' case and a situation of non-engagement by the father in the family. The family had been living in Haringey for 8 years at the same address. There are two parents and 13 children. The family has been known to statutory services primarily because of the poor school attendance and neglect since 2010. In 2015 one of the children died in a fire accident in a caravan owned by a neighbour. A recent referral to the front door about 3 of the children's poor and non-attendance at local schools and as a result mother is serving a 100-hour community sentence and father is tagged.

From the internal mapping with professionals it was clear that the 3 children were most at risk of losing out as:

- Father is not engaging and says education has to be secondary to the family and the community
- Mother says education is helpful, but it needs to be part of the home and community life
- Mother and older children say meeting the needs of a big family and a disabled family member is a lot to cope with
- Children say the family routines are often interrupted when other extended family and community members come to London to visit as there is a lot of catching up to do
- Children say they find the school too far to travel to and with the chores and looking after the animals they are often late
- Father views contact with mainstream as a threat to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture

- The two youngest children, age 6 & 7 attend the local primary school and are popular with the other children. They both like school.
- The child at the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) had been expelled from 2 other secondary schools 5 months apart and appeared to be getting on well for the first 3 months but in December got into fights, swearing, pulling a knife and assaulted a staff member at the PRU.

I wanted the Signs of Safety framework to be the vehicle for work with this family to build on the family/community's strengths rather than its weaknesses which was highlighted in the mapping. In practice this would mean developing Solutions Focused Questions and also work with the practitioners to develop guidance for this and other similar situations in the future. I also wanted to work towards integrating some ideas with those tools and processes that colleagues already have in place which included very good direct work with children and outreach work which the specialist Travellers' community adviser had started.

There are number of practical steps which were followed that helped with improving how practitioners engaged with this family which can be adapted for working with other similar situations:

- Assume that not everyone reads and writes and use drawings and discussion as the basis for communication. Father missed out on schooling and like a number of older Traveller families his own parents were on the move constantly to seek employment. Father says he had been home educated.
- Learn more about Gypsy and Traveller culture - Both Headteachers and the wider professionals network felt they did not know a great deal about the culture, heritage and ways of living and felt a lot of what they had picked up was through the general mass media. In Haringey there have been a number of sensational stories about Traveller families in the local press which have not helped with community cohesion and understanding. Elected Members and others are not always effectively providing the leadership which deals with myths and negative stereotyping use to fuel fear and mistrust.
- Ensure culturally appropriate responses - In Haringey there is a range of self-organised support groups including a Gypsy and Traveller Education Support Group which meets monthly to support education success. There are a number of Traveller Young people at University who volunteer as mentors and advocates for children wanting to access and excel in their studies. There is a dedicated specialist team of advisers whose role is to help Traveller and Gypsy families with access to Council services.
- Engage as professional network - It is vital for the wellbeing and better educational outcomes that agencies work together to deliver a more coherent response to Traveller and Gypsy families. Like all families but especially so for Traveller and Gypsy families there is the worry about writing and reading with a number of similar questions being asked. The parents felt they could not attend the Parents' meetings as the schools would judge them for not being able to read and write.
- Making use of the role models in the family's own circle/network - Traveller and Gypsy families have very strong community identities. Whenever there is a crisis the

communities come together to help sort things out. There are a number of role models in the Haringey Traveller & Gypsy communities who value education and have come forward to support members of their community when times are not good.

### **Use Solutions Focused Questions:**

*Questions for Father/Others who are showing reluctance to engage with Schools/other agencies*

- Tell me about the things you think the schools might want us to meet? What is it they want to be done and what does this look like? How much of the things that need to be done have to be different and what does it look like?
- When was the last time you did something like the things that were different for schooling? For the older children maybe? How and what was different then? What did you do? What is that your wife, other children, family, other community members noticed that was different.
- Imagine you had do this again (the different things), what would you need to do - first step to make it happen? How confident are you that you could do this again? If you feel nervous about doing this/these what might help for you to be more confident? Is there anyone out there in your family/network that might be able to help?
- How will you know that you have done enough? Is it your wife/ children that will notice? What might they see as as different?

### **Relationships questions:**

- You have a close family and what is it that they do that you like most and what would the children say they like most about their family?
- What would the 3 children notice about you that tell them that education is a good thing and a priority for you their parents?
- What is it the older children who have now left school say about what you are doing now is different for their younger siblings?
- Tell me about the most important people in your life and in your children's life (friends, neighbours, pastor, other Travellers, own parents, any teachers/)?
- If you had all the support you wanted - what would this look like? Who would be doing what?
- How to you manage to cope with the children's routines? How do you juggle this with also looking after a child who also has additional needs? Who helps most with the children?
- You must want the best for your children and how would education help in getting the best? what does this look like?
- What is the three youngest children will say they like about school?
- What has to be different as a result of us working together to make things better for you and your children?
- To parents: What is the highest level of schooling you have completed? In what ways has this helped you and your family?

In conclusion, there is a challenge to professionals working with different communities to tackle neglect and also safeguard children when concerns are identified whilst using knowledge of their communities to help children and their families to feel safe and at the

same time support their identity, community and way of living. This guide will hopefully have given a starting point and some useful tips to consider.