

Gypsy/Traveller Children and Families: The Potential of Working with Networks

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This article describes a service that aimed to support the development of play and leisure opportunities for Gypsy/Traveller children. It uncovered a high demand for direct service provision, and there was limited capacity for action to make existing provision more inclusive. The article suggests how a focus upon networks, between Gypsy/Traveller communities, between service providers, and upon bridges between the two, could reduce the exclusion experienced by Gypsy/Traveller children and families.

Introduction

This article discusses a service for Gypsy/Traveller children and families that aimed to support the development of play and leisure opportunities across one of the nine English Government Regions. This was the subject of a case study undertaken as part of the National Evaluation of the Children's Fund (NECF). We conclude by reflecting on the significance of service provider networks and on the rather limited focus on the networks of Gypsy/Traveller children and families themselves in developing preventative strategies in this context.

Gypsy/Traveller children and families: a history of unmet need

Gypsy/Traveller¹ communities are amongst the most marginalised groups in the UK. In a review of the limited research literature, Hester (2004) shows how mainstream services are designed on the assumption of sedentary lifestyles and that there has been a reluctance on the part of public agencies to accept responsibility for ensuring the basic necessities of a safe place to live, and appropriate education and health services for Gypsy/Traveller communities.

Educational objectives are central to the Children's Fund. In 1999, OFSTED stated that 'Gypsy/Traveller pupils are the group most at risk in the education system' (OFSTED, 1999: 7; cited in Hester, 2004: 14). This was despite a range of policy reports and papers that had highlighted this since the issue was first raised in 1967. Most recently, concern was repeated in 'Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Gypsy/Traveller Pupils' (DfES, 2003). These reports and reviews document the prejudice faced within schools by Gypsy/Traveller children, and the difficulties for mobile families in maintaining links with schools and continuity in their education. Although traditionally there has been resistance

to formal (particularly secondary) education amongst Gypsy/Traveller communities:

too much emphasis on cultural expectations can lead to a theory of cultural pathology in which other related factors may be given insufficient attention or even overlooked. (Derrington, 2003 cited in Hester, 2004: 23)

Hester also discusses the health status of Gypsy/Travellers, identifying them as a 'marginalised' and 'high need' group who are 'budget unattractive' as they require outreach, tailored and specialist services. As with education, Gypsy/Traveller children and families have experienced long-term exclusion from health services, or (where they have been able to receive them) to services appropriate to their needs (Pahl and Vaile, 1988; Webb, 1998, cited in Hester, 2004: 39–40).

During the run-up to the election of May 2005, the continued prejudice against Gypsy/Travellers as ethnic groups was typified through a campaign against them within sections of the (printed) media. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 had removed the duty of Local Authorities to provide sites for Gypsy/Travellers, leaving an acute shortage of places to live. In March 2005, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) announced a new duty on Local Authorities to *identify* land that could be bought and developed by Gypsy/Travellers, and strengthened their powers to stop unauthorised development. *The Sun* newspaper subsequently launched an aggressive 'Stamp on the camps' campaign, typifying the attitude within certain sections of the press. Such negative media portrayals only serve to heighten the prejudice that surrounds Gypsy/Traveller children, families and communities.

NECF sought to understand the experience of marginalised children and their families in relation to six dimensions of social exclusion (see Mason *et al.*, 2006 for a fuller discussion in relation to Gypsy/Travellers).

1 *Material*

Although there are wide fluctuations in income levels amongst Gypsy/Travellers in the region studied, there is significant income and material poverty.

2 *Access to public and private resources*

The history of the Gypsy/Traveller is one of exclusion from services and opportunities.

3 *Spatial*

The physical isolation of Gypsy/Traveller sites places them on the margins; whilst movement between areas is usually mobility between marginalised spaces.

4 *Cultural*

Despite the prejudice experienced, many of the groups that constitute 'Gypsy/Travellers' are outside the putative protection of anti-discrimination legislation. 'Gypsy/Traveller' may be housed, but their ethnic identity remains and should be recognised.

5 *Self determination*

Gypsy/Travellers exercise self determination that sustains a collective identity, but this is constrained by legislation and other exclusionary factors that inhibit freedom to live a mobile lifestyle, for example through lack of places to stop.

6 *Decision making*

As well as being disenfranchised from voting due to their mobility, Gypsy/Travellers are rarely targeted for involvement in local policy and service planning.

The regional service

The development of a service by a regional consortium of Children's Fund Partnerships needs to be understood in the context of the circumstances of Gypsy/Travellers in the six local authority areas involved. Whilst provision and policies varied, none of the sites covered by the service had facilities or play areas for children or young people.

Old Town²

Old Town had a local authority site for Gypsy/Travellers and although the main focus of the service was the site, it developed to include housed families as well. The site was situated a mile or so outside the nearest suburban area and accessed by a narrow road leading from a dual carriageway. There was no public transport near to the site.

New City

In New City the focus of the service was split across two sites, and also included some housed families. The main site was privately owned and located next to a major industrial estate five miles from the city centre with no accessible public transport. It was close to a major road used by heavy goods vehicles and was at least a mile away from any residential area. The second site was again on the outskirts of New City, surrounded by farmland, not served by any public transport and only marginally served by council services.

Big City

A strict eviction policy adopted by the local authority meant that only a small number of children were in contact with the service. Many traditional stopping places had been removed and families, by necessity, had moved into housing. During the evaluation, the families were never in the city for more than a few days at a time.

Old Borough

Here the service focused on one site that was owned privately by a small number of families and had around 20 homes. The site was isolated from the local community and there was an infrequent bus service. It was under threat of compulsory purchase by a local airport. Although the owners of the site had been offered financial compensation, their major concern was that they would not be able to secure planning permission for another piece of land locally.

The Shire

Gypsy/Travellers constituted the largest minority ethnic group in this rural area. The service worked with families on two sites spread across the county. One of these was a local authority site, the other was privately owned. The Shire had an integrated network of services for Gypsy/Traveller families, reflecting the longevity of their relationships with the area. A mobile health unit visited sites to provide advice and treatment, and the county had a Travellers support group, providing and commissioning services for adults, as well as children and young people.

New Borough

As a result of aggressive local authority eviction policies, New Borough saw large numbers of Gypsy/Travellers in sporadic bursts as they travelled through the area. The local authority focussed on the quick eviction of these families. Sedentary workers found this itinerant group of Gypsy/Travellers one of the most difficult groups to access. There were also a number of housed families in New Borough.

Origins and development of the regional service

Identification of need

During the second year of the Children's Fund (2002), whilst partnerships were still in an early stage of development, the regional Government Office (GOR) gathered together Programme Managers from each of the region's Children's Funds to explore the possibility of collaboration. GOR had been approached by the Gypsy/Traveller Education Consortium for the Region (ECR) and a large voluntary sector organisation (LVS). ECR's remit was limited to education, but they had identified a need for a regional service that addressed the wider needs of children and families. LVS had a history of work with Gypsy/Traveller communities in the region and working links with ECR. Together they presented the rationale for a regional service to each of the Children's Fund programmes. The presentation concerned the needs amongst Gypsy/Traveller families within the region and the possibilities for a service that worked with ECR. At that time, the detail of the service was undefined and open for development.

Early consortium development

This proposal resonated with Children's Fund Partnerships that had identified Gypsy/Travellers as a group they intended to target within their programme. Other Partnerships had not intended to target this group but were attracted by the proposal of a regional service; others did not intend to work with the group due to low numbers within their areas; others had already committed budgets; and others had yet to reach the stage whereby they were ready to commission services. GOR facilitated the development of a Consortium and provided some administrative support. Six Children's Fund Partnerships, from a possible 14, were formally committed to the Consortium from June 2003, along with ECR and LVS. This was considered by the Consortium members to constitute a sufficient 'critical mass' to take forward the development of a regional service.

There was a long and fractured period of development. Not all Partnerships were able to contribute the same levels of funding. Indeed, not all areas had comparable numbers of Gypsy/Traveller families living, however temporarily, within their localities, but Consortium members did want to provide a service for Gypsy/Travellers whilst they were in their areas. It was intended that the regional service would necessarily provide different amounts of provision within the different Local Authority areas at different times, and that families would receive the same support as they moved between areas. Thus it was agreed that Consortium members could contribute different amounts of funding to the central fund. This model was proposed as an alternative to traditional models of public service delivery that are bounded by geographical limits of neighbourhood, postcode sector or local authority boundary.

Aims and objectives

Although different Children's Fund Partnerships had locally defined programmes, all shared the common objectives of the Children's Fund initiative itself. Similarly, although some Partnerships had particular concerns for the Gypsy/Traveller service, a common framework for aims and objectives was developed by LVS and ECR and subsequently revised and agreed by the other Consortium members. The service was organised around a set of core concerns, developed from the knowledge gained through the work of LVS and ECR with Gypsy/Traveller children and families. Central to the service was the lack of play and leisure activities available to Gypsy/Traveller children across the region. There were several, interrelated reasons identified by the Consortium for this:

- Gypsy/Traveller families are isolated from both mainstream and neighbourhood-based provision, either because they live on sites that are physically isolated, or are housed but isolated from the rest of their community;
- families and children lack the confidence to access services due to discriminatory experiences and fears about this;
- services are unaware of or unwilling to work with local Gypsy/Traveller communities; and,
- (mobile) Gypsy/Traveller families lack knowledge of local service provision.

Local project plans were organised around a set of objectives and related activities, identified through the production of a Theory of Change to inform and guide the evaluation (see Mason *et al.*, 2006 for more details). There were four elements to the approach adopted. First, was a *focus on mainstream service providers and on workers delivering other Children's Fund services across the region*. The intention was to provide training and advocacy in order to raise awareness and ensure the development of more appropriate services, sensitive to Gypsy/Traveller needs. Second, was a *focus on Gypsy/Traveller parents*. Direct work with parents was intended to build awareness of the services that were available; develop confidence and self-esteem; ensure knowledge of rights to access services and increase the opportunities available to families. Third, was *direct support for Gypsy/Traveller children and young people* to enable them to access play and leisure services. This was considered likely to build their confidence and self esteem. It was hoped that positive experiences would encourage them to seek out other opportunities without direct support, as well as providing short-term benefits to well-being. Fourth, was a *focus on the settled community*. It was recognised by the Consortium that high levels of prejudice towards Gypsy/Travellers within the settled community needed to be addressed. The service was considered to have little capacity to address this head on, but suggested that work with service providers, schools and those from the settled community using these services could start to make a difference.

The funding provided was sufficient to employ three Development Officers (DOs), each working across two Children's Fund Partnership areas, coupled due to patterns of movement between areas within the region and their geographic proximity to each other. DOs were to work with ECR to identify particular needs at individual and family levels, as well as drawing on their knowledge of local Gypsy/Traveller communities. One role of ECR was to act as gatekeeper to the communities and families themselves.

From design to delivery

The operational start of the service was delayed. This was a result of the time taken for the Consortium to develop as a group. There were also difficulties in recruiting DOs to the posts, and the service did not begin to deliver until June 2004.

Toward the end of 2004, Children's Fund Partnerships were required to develop new plans for service delivery to cover the period 2005–2008. This requirement came with a new financial award for that period, and three of the six Partnerships decided not to fund the Regional Consortium any further at this stage. Three Partnerships agreed to fund the service for a final year (2005–2006). The service was reviewed in light of this, and a new emphasis was placed on capacity building and development work. The service had found high levels of need amongst children and families for play and leisure activities and almost all of the DOs' capacity had been taken up getting to know families, areas and needs, and identifying appropriate opportunities. The review recognised that, in order to achieve sustainability, a greater focus needed to be placed upon work with service providers and capacity building amongst Gypsy/Traveller communities themselves. Greater consultation was also built in, to regularly review the service with users, and regional structures and postholders were targeted to explore models for a 'regional response' to the needs of Gypsy/Traveller children and families.

Project Delivery: working with Gypsy/Travellers to achieve social inclusion

The following discussion of service delivery is structured in relation to the four elements of the work undertaken.

Focus on mainstream service providers and on workers delivering other Children's Fund services across the region

Although highlighted as at the core of the Consortium's work, a number of factors led to a dilution in the emphasis on this objective in practice. The first of these factors was that of capacity. The high levels of need, and the immediacy required in meeting these needs, led to a prioritisation of direct work with children, with work targeted at service providers limited to those directly involved with these particular children. DOs worked with parents and children to identify their own needs and interests. Local provision was then reviewed to identify opportunities, and then children were 'hand held' to access these services. This created a heavy workload for the DOs. In some areas, a lack of local facilities led to specific activities being developed from scratch and this also took the focus away from working with mainstream and other service providers to raise awareness.

The overall capacity of the service was limited by the amount of funding available from each of the Consortium's members. As the local authority areas were in some instances geographically quite far apart across the region, a significant proportion of DOs' time was taken up with travelling. This placed further limits on the time available for familiarisation with and networking within the differing locales as DOs were based outside of them.

In consequence, work with agencies and with Children's Fund services intended to develop more inclusive policies and practices was limited. Training was provided by ECR for a small number of service providers and awareness raising and advocacy took place, but these were largely driven by needs as they arose. For example, a service near a large

Gypsy/Traveller site agreed to work with children and families, and the DO organised training for service delivery staff and for other local organisations. Individual services, or individuals within larger services, adjusted their practices or began to work with Gypsy/Traveller where they had not before. Nonetheless, the limits on capacity meant this work was piecemeal and centred largely around specific service delivery, rather than adopting a more strategic approach to the development of local infrastructure(s).

Focus on Gypsy/Traveller parents

This work also suffered from the amount of capacity that was taken up by the immediacy of children's needs for leisure and other activities. Parents saw positive impacts from even the simplest activities for their children. But there were practical barriers to families accessing services in addition to cultural and capacity issues.

The first of these issues was income. Low income is a major barrier to some Gypsy/Traveller families, whether they live on sites or are housed. Some parents cited a lack of resources as the key barrier to them accessing leisure and other services and opportunities. However, Gypsy/Traveller communities are in no way homogenous and some families were resistant to the 'charity' that they saw the project as providing.

Another limiting factor was families' access to transport. The majority of children are cared for primarily by their mothers who, particularly during the daytime, often had little or no access to any form of transport of their own; for example, when male partners were off-site in the family vehicle. The physical isolation of sites meant that fuel costs added a further burden to limited incomes and public transport was virtually non-existent. Only one of the sites had services that came to the site itself. Where DOs were working with communities on sites and hence with groups of children, they needed to plan and arrange transport to and from the sites. Some common problems emerged, usually around issues of taxi or minibus providers being reluctant to travel to sites, allegedly because of their geographically isolated nature or due to their perceptions of Gypsy/Traveller children and fear of damage to vehicles or even staff.

A central issue identified in the development of the service was that low confidence, suspicion and fear expressed by parents (again, usually mothers) prevented them from engaging their children in 'mainstream' leisure activities that might build resilience and promote social inclusion. Although NECF findings suggest that some parents do indeed have these fears and suspicions, stemming from direct experiences of prejudice and discrimination, these issues are complex. One benefit of the service reported by mothers was the respite provided when children were taken off site or away from their house. In these instances, the service was working to a different set of concerns than those held by parents. Low literacy levels amongst parents was another difficulty. Although families and friends work to support each other with form filling and other bureaucracy, workers needed to find ways of raising awareness amongst parents that did not assume a particular level of literacy.

Direct skills provision was beyond the remit of the project, but experience suggests that a comprehensive programme for adults could have equal benefits to direct work with children. Nevertheless, the project had some notable successes. One of the mothers on a site began to accompany the DO to play sessions, which groups of Gypsy/Traveller children were being taken to, and began to do this independently as a volunteer with a view to training for a qualification. Another (housed) mother was working with a

DO to develop local play provision for her and other local children. And some parents accompanied DOs to participation and other consultation events, ensuring their voices were heard. Towards the end of the project, five mothers joined a local parenting skills course.

Focus on Gypsy/Traveller children and young people

This objective became the priority in terms of the time spent by the DOs' in planning, organising and delivering direct access to leisure services for Gypsy/Traveller children. Nonetheless, this work also was subject to a number of pressures and constraints. The geographical coverage of the service was large, but the different circumstances amongst the sites, the families who were housed, and the different locales, presented their own challenges and opportunities. DOs working with housed families or on small sites were able to undertake quite individually focused work with very small groups of children. But where the work was taking place on large sites, there was a greater demand for the service than one DO was able to meet. There were limits on the number of children any one worker can safely work with – and childcare/playworker support for DOs was infrequent and sometimes unreliable. Hence, not all children were able to access the opportunities provided by the service each time the DO visited their site. This demand on limited places meant DOs were required to carefully manage expectations.

The capacity of the service limited attempts at regularity and continuity in service delivery. This in turn limited DO's capacity to develop relationships with and build networks amongst parents as well as service providers, organisations and agencies. The benefits of attending leisure and other activities were clear to those parents who used the service, and to the children themselves. Nonetheless, although some children continued to access services and activities independently, positive experiences were not enough to enable Gypsy/Travellers to increase their use of services, due to the complex combination of factors outlined above. What was lacking across all of the areas where the service was delivered, was accessible, cheap, local provision or provision which reached out to Gypsy/Traveller communities.

Focus on the settled community

Work towards the final objective was particularly problematic. The complex political and cultural issues lying behind this service objective have a history dating back centuries – and that history is one of severe persecution of Gypsy/Traveller communities of all heritages (Hester, 2004). The service was able to demonstrate few inroads into challenging the prejudice felt by members of the settled community, but nevertheless some significant actions were taken. But, as this objective was always regarded as a hoped for benefit from the direct work with services, it was limited by the constraints of that work itself. As we have described, the work with services was *ad hoc* rather than strategic. The activities for Gypsy/Traveller children organised as a result of limited local facilities, by their nature, did not bring them into contact with other local children.

Mobilising networks?

Gypsies and Travellers are often part of strong networks, with social bonds and ties arising from cultural and ethnic identity, and from their shared and common experiences, both

positive and negative (Hester, 2004). We can draw here on insights from the social capital literature (e.g. Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000), the themes of which are outlined by Barnes and Prior in this volume, to understand the form and purpose of such 'bonding' networks. However, although 'Gypsies' and 'Travellers' are often considered as a single group for the purposes of policy and service development, there are distinct groups within this overall categorisation, including Irish travellers, Roma, and other mobile or travelling groups, such as Fairground People and New Travellers. Within and across the sites where the project was working, there were strong communities of English Gypsies and Irish Travellers and seasonal communities of Fairground People. We found differences within sites and between families which demonstrate that 'Gypsy/Travellers' do not constitute a homogenous group who all share the same values. As within any other community, there were differences in the importance families attached to education, to work, to leisure, to gender roles and other facets of family and community life. Some families who were housed were excluded from the close networks that exist within mobile or site-based Gypsy/Traveller communities. This heterogeneity needs to be recognised.

DOs did not focus their work upon existing networks amongst the Gypsy/Traveller communities, nor upon the development of new ones between communities or between communities and service providers and their networks. The lack of such connections can be understood as a lack of 'bridging' and 'linking' social capital, and the development of these could have been the focus of a strategy for social inclusion. Although the service did aim to develop networks amongst service providers, and provide routes into these for Gypsy/Traveller families, their focus upon linking children with local play provision or providing it where it was lacking limited the capacity of the service to achieve this.

A central tenet of the Consortium service was that a regional structure would provide Gypsy/Traveller families with a consistent service and point of contact as they moved within and across the region, and that information could move between service, practitioner and other networks. However, the Consortium never included all Children's Fund partnerships in the region, and service provider and policy networks did not develop beyond the local contacts necessary to provide services to specific children and families. The second year of operation included just three Children's Fund areas from 14, and one of these was Big City where aggressive 'moving on' policies limited the families in contact with the service. Attempts to develop a broader regional grouping were stymied by the lack of capacity and expertise to develop and support a network of stakeholders in children and family services across the region, especially during a time of flux in their organisation and structure (locally, regionally and nationally). The lack of close working between ECR and DOs meant that this *a priori* network was not developed nor sustained.

In some of the local authority areas where the service operated, service providers met in forums or network meetings to share information and practice. Yet the commitment to these amongst members was variable, and within a context lacking strategic direction from local, regional or national government, such groupings were limited in their powers to affect change. DOs worked with these networks but were unable to exert influence in developing capacity, commitment or the networks themselves. The relationships between teachers working with the education consortium and the Children's Fund service provider failed to develop into close partnerships, in part because of concerns amongst the teachers that the time limited service offered by the Children's Fund would result in families feeling let down by services being provided and then withdrawn. Thus this intended network itself did not develop (See Mason *et al.*, 2006 for details).

The service did demonstrate the potential for the development of close working relationships with Gypsy/Traveller families based both on enabling access to new opportunities for children and support and advocacy for parents in dealing with official agencies. The 'informality' of the approach made by DOs via a welcome and non-threatening offer of access to play and leisure services meant that they could enter into Gypsy/Traveller communities and make contact with other families through existing community networks. In response, they needed to be able to use their multi-agency networks to offer consistent support across time and space. They needed to provide *links* to mainstream and other services and networks, and ensure that these would be inclusionary in terms of their openness to Gypsy/Traveller children and families, working with difference, rather than being inclusionary in expecting a (cultural) consensus to emerge.

Conclusion

The limited capacity of the service to address issues beyond the immediate demand for play and leisure opportunities amongst Gypsy/Traveller children was a key characteristic of this initiative. In the context of the social exclusion experienced by Gypsy/Traveller communities, the lack of strategic focus left the activities and support provided unsustainable, being dependent upon Children's Fund (or alternative) funding rather than developing more inclusive mainstream services.

The rationale was to develop service provider networks across the region that could enable a consistent response as families moved across local authority boundaries. It largely failed in this ambition. The service itself was based on an assumption that engaging children in mainstream services was the route to social inclusion. What it did not attempt to do was to work with existing strengths of Gypsy/Traveller communities, nor to deliberately build the social bridges between children from these communities and settled communities that might overcome some of the prejudices that contribute to their exclusion. Rather than a focus upon the provision of, or links to, play and services for individual or groups of children, networks amongst services and between services and communities could be developed and engaged to achieve social inclusion for Gypsy/Traveller children and families.

Notes

1 We do not have the space here to enter into a detailed discussion about the terms 'Gypsy' and 'Traveller'. 'Gypsy/Traveller' is used within the Regional Consortium, and hence here, as a catch-all term that also recognises the two groups of (Roma) Gypsies and Irish Travellers as distinct ethnic groups. The coupling of the terms is a common one within the literature (see Kendrick, 1998).

2 We have used pseudonyms for locations as NECF policy is not to identify case study areas.

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