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Friends, Families and Travellers

A guide for professionals working
with Gypsies, Roma and Travellers
in Children's Services

By Sarah Sweeney and Zoe Matthews Friends, Families and Travellers





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INTRODUCTION

In a recent analysis of the population of ‘looked after’ children and young people in England, Dan Allen estimated that Gypsy and Traveller children were three times more likely to be taken into care than any other child. Between 2009 and 2015, there has been an increase of 733% of Gypsy or Roma children in foster care and an increase of 200% of Traveller children in foster care.¹

The disproportionately high presence of Gypsies and Travellers in care necessitates the promotion of an understanding of Gypsy and Traveller culture, values and norms amongst professionals involved throughout the process of safeguarding vulnerable children.

Gypsies and Travellers are an often misunderstood and socially excluded group with a distinctive culture and heritage. This can make it problematic for authorities to engage with Gypsies and Travellers effectively and to adopt practices which are culturally appropriate.

A history of mistrust and suspicion between Gypsies and Travellers and authorities, arising from a history of institutionalised prejudice and mistreatment means that developing mutually beneficial relationships of trust and positive communication can sometimes be challenging.

Sarah Cemlyn² identified two conflicting risks in the often difficult relationship between social workers and Gypsy and Traveller communities. Firstly, the over-involvement of social workers, resulting in children being taken into care unnecessarily and secondly, ignorance of Gypsy and Traveller issues leading to the needs of vulnerable children being left unmet.

This paper seeks to outline basic guidelines for professionals working with Gypsies and Travellers in Children’s Services, as well as a list of recommendations for better provision of services on a national level.

1 Dan Allen & Mairtain Moloney-Neachtain, Supporting Gypsies, Roma and Travellers understand social work involvement, The Travellers’ Times, 21 December 2015, <http://travellerstimes.org.uk/Blogs-Features/Supporting-GRT-understand-social-work-involvement.aspx>
2 Sarah Cemlyn, Research re social work with Gypsies and Travellers 1983-2012, University of Bristol School for Policy Studies.

GYPGY AND TRAVELLER BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Status

In the 2011 Census for England and Wales, 58,000 respondents identified themselves as Gypsy or Irish Traveller. Other sources estimate that the population size of Gypsies and Travellers could be anywhere between 82,000 and 300,000 people³.

Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers are defined as ethnic groups and protected from discrimination under the Equality Act 2010⁴. With an estimated population of between two and twenty million Gypsies in Europe, they constitute the largest ethnic minority group on the continent⁵.

There are a number of different groups who fall under the title of Gypsies and Travellers; Romany Gypsies, Irish Travellers, Scottish Gypsies and Travellers, Welsh Gypsies and Travellers, New Travellers, Bargees and others living in boats and Travelling Showpeople.

“Despite the important differences that exist between these diverse groups of people, all seem to share common experiences, of racism, discrimination, poverty, social injustice including the systematic removal of children into public care.”

Dan Allen⁶

3 Office for National Statistics, 2011 Census analysis: What does the 2011 Census tell us about the characteristics of Gypsy or Irish travellers in England and Wales? 21 January 2014 <http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/whatdoesthe2011censustellusaboutthecharacteristicsofgypsyoririshtravellersinenglandandwales/2014-01-21>

4 Citizens Advice, Gypsies and Travellers - race discrimination Last accessed: 29 August 2016 <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/discrimination/protected-characteristics/gypsies-and-travellers-race-discrimination/>

5 See footnote 3.

6 Dan Allen, Protecting the cultural identity of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in the public care system, Today's Children Tomorrow's Parents , p2



History

It is generally believed that Roma and Romany Gypsy populations in Britain originated from the Indian diaspora in the tenth century. Over the following centuries, Gypsies and Travellers made their way through Europe, both seeking work and fleeing from persecution until they arrived on the shores of Britain by the 16th century⁷.

This group of Gypsies and Travellers were preceded in Britain by Irish Travellers, also known as Pavees. Pavees are a distinct ethnic minority and research shows that they have been separated from the settled community for over 1000 years⁸. Traditionally, Pavees were travelling crafts people with their own culture, language and traditions. They travelled from place to place offering their services in tin-smithing, farm labour, recycling and more⁹.

Throughout history, Gypsies and Travellers have been met with racism and persecution in many forms. Suspicion and lack of understanding of the nomadic way of life has meant that Gypsies and Travellers have often found themselves being moved from stopping point to stopping point, unwelcome in many areas. The level of hostility between authorities and the Gypsy and Traveller community has led to fear and a breakdown of trust. Some scholars argue that individuals and groups of people from the Gypsy and Travellers community sometimes choose to be excluded from society to protect their culture and traditions from external interference and influence¹⁰.

7 Becky Taylor, Britain's Gypsy Travellers: A People on the Outside, History Today, Volume 61, Issue 6, June 2011

8 Jennifer Hough, DNA Study: Travellers a distinct ethnicity, Irish Examiner, 31 May 2011 <http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/health/dna-study-travellers-a-distinct-ethnicity-156324.html>

9 Traveller Heritage, Meath Travellers Workshops Living History Exhibition, Last accessed: 19 August 2016 <http://www.travellerheritage.ie/livinghistory.asp>

10 Ryan Powell, Gypsy-Travellers and welfare professional discourse: On individualization and social integration, Antipode, 43 (2), pp. 471-493

Representation

“From the 16th century to the present day, no ethnic groups in Britain have aroused as much curiosity, romance, hatred and fear as Gypsies and Travellers. Often misunderstood, maligned and exoticized, most people’s perceptions of Britain’s Gypsies and Travellers are based on a mixture of romanticism, prejudice and ignorance.”

Jake Bowers, Travellers’ Times¹¹

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According to a recent study by YouGov¹², Gypsies and Travellers are the least tolerated minority group in Northern Europe, with 58% of respondents in Britain reporting a negative impression of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers. Much of the general public’s opinion and knowledge on Gypsies and Travellers is reliant on media reports and entertainment coverage which can often be misinformed and reinforce false stereotypes.

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Many social workers lack unbiased and representative sources of information on Gypsy and Traveller culture. They are forced to rely on media representations of the culture, meaning that they can often make poor decisions based on myths or misunderstandings.

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11 Jake Bowers, Gypsies and Travellers: Their lifestyle, history and culture, The Travellers’ Times, Last accessed: 19 August 2016 <http://travellerstimes.org.uk/UserFiles/Resources/lifestylehistoryandculture24052010111520.pdf>

12 Will Dahlgreen , Roma people and Muslims are the least tolerated minorities in Europe, YouGov UK, 5 May 2015 <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/06/05/european-attitudes-minorities/>



Inequalities faced by Gypsies and Travellers

Gypsies and Travellers, as well as experiencing discrimination can face challenges and difficulties in many aspects of life:

- Education

Of the people who identified as Gypsy or Traveller in the 2011 census of England and Wales, 60% had no formal qualifications whatsoever. This is three times higher than the national average¹³.

- Health

Life expectancy of Gypsies and Travellers is ten years shorter than the national average¹⁴.

- Prison

One in twenty prisoners identified as Gypsy, Roma or Traveller, despite the fact that only 0.1% of the population identify as Gypsy or Irish Traveller¹⁵.

It is clear from these statistics that members of the Gypsy and Traveller community can face unique challenges and difficulties by virtue of their Traveller status, therefore some members may require extra help and assistance at times.

¹³ Damian Le Bas, Yes, Gypsies lag in education, but the reasons are complex and cultural, The Guardian, 22 January 2014
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/22/gypsies-lagging-education-gypsies-travellers>

¹⁴ Equality and Human Rights Commission, Gypsies and Travellers: simple solutions for living together, Last accessed: 19 August 2016,
<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/gypsies-and-travellers-simple-solutions-living-together>

¹⁵ Joseph Cottrell-Boyce, Too many Gypsies and Travellers end up in prison – this must be addressed, The Guardian, 12 March 2014
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/12/too-many-gypsies-travellers-prison-education>

A RATIONALE FOR BETTER GYPSY AND TRAVELLER SERVICES WITHIN CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Children's Services exists to protect one of society's most vulnerable groups; children. Whilst for the majority of children in the United Kingdom, the family is the primary source of provision, learning, love and encouragement, there are instances where the family can be a source of harm to the child. When this happens, it is the duty of the community around the child to protect and safeguard the child and the responsibility of the relevant authorities to intervene, taking steps to ensure the child's wellbeing.

As mentioned earlier, the care system in the United Kingdom has a disproportionate representation of children from Gypsy and Traveller families.

The cause of the over-representation of Gypsies and Travellers in care is unclear. It is important not to assume that the over-representation of Gypsies and Travellers in care reflects a deficiency in the culture. On the contrary, family is a central component of Gypsy and Traveller culture. The priority, at this point, is to ensure that every Gypsy and Traveller child at risk of harm receives adequate and appropriate care.

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From a legal standpoint, case law in 1988 granted Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers legal status as ethnic groups. In the context of Children's Services, the Human Rights Act 1998, Equalities Act 2010 and Children's Act 1989 require that every child is looked after in a way that "respects, recognises, supports and celebrates their identity"¹⁶. This includes the child's ethnic origin and cultural background. This means that professionals and foster carers are required to provide individual support to ensure Gypsy and Traveller children's cultural needs are met.

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16 HM Government, The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services, Department for Education, p21, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/274220/Children_Act_1989_fostering_services.pdf



In practice, this aim is rarely realised. Cemlyn found that only 4% of Social Services departments had specific policies for Gypsies and Travellers¹⁷. Garrett found that 42% of Social Services departments delivered 'specific services'¹⁸ but there was little detail available as to what this entailed. When Gypsy and Traveller children's cultural needs are left unmet, this can cause acculturative distress and isolation.

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In addition to cultural considerations, the nomadic way of life led by many Gypsies and Travellers can present a new challenge for many social workers accustomed to working with the settled community. A localised approach to social work and challenges in collaborative efforts between local authorities can leave social workers feeling that they have no choice but to make urgent and intrusive interventions in Gypsy and Traveller families whilst children who may be at risk temporarily reside in their geographic area and jurisdiction of care.

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As when working with the settled population, professionals within Children's Services should aim to achieve a healthy balance between supporting nomadic families in caring for their own children and intervening when necessary to ensure the welfare of at risk children. If they are to achieve this aim, social workers cannot operate with a 'business as usual' approach. In this guide, we will outline ideas and approaches of how professionals within children's services can better engage with Gypsy and Traveller families and how services can be adjusted to meet their unique needs.

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As a result of cultural incompetency and a rigid and localised approach to child protection, local authorities are currently failing to meet their mandate to safeguard at risk Gypsy and Traveller children in a culturally appropriate manner. This is an area of immediate concern that must be addressed.

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17 Sarah Cemlyn, Policy and Provision by Social Services for Traveller Children and Families: Report on Research Study University of Bristol, 1998

18 Paul Michael Garrett, Social Work and Irish People in Britain, Bristol: Policy Press, 2004

THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

Although the child protection system across the United Kingdom differs in each country, the principles and goals remain the same. The child protection system can be broken into five main stages:

1. Referral

2. Assessment

3. Information sharing and care planning

4. Court proceedings

5. Outcome

The next section will outline considerations and recommendations to take into account at each stage of the child protection process.

1. Referral

As many people in the general public see the Gypsy and Traveller lifestyle as foreign and threatening, malicious or misguided referrals are common. When a referral is received for a Gypsy and Traveller family, consider the cultural competence of the person who has made the referral and whether or not the referral indicates that a child is at risk or whether it is based on a lack of understanding of Gypsy and Traveller culture.

When a referral is made which indicates lack of understanding of Gypsy and Traveller culture or racism towards Gypsies and Travellers, arrange a visit to the referring individuals and discuss the issue.



2. Assessment

If after a referral is made, there is any indication that a child is at risk of harm, the next stage is to take action to remove the child from any immediate risk of danger and to begin assessing the child's welfare and safety needs.

A wide range of assessments are used across different geographical locations and by different local authorities, however, when applying them to new circumstances, it is essential to make sure that they remain relevant and appropriate. Therefore, when assessing the welfare and safety needs of a child in a Gypsy and Traveller family, it is important to use culturally appropriate methods of assessment in order to get the best results.

POINTS TO CONSIDER:

i. Routine and Timekeeping

Questions about time management may be inappropriate in a Gypsy and Traveller context where an emphasis on routine is less likely than in other parts of society. Parents may not have an organised routine for their children but instead adopt a more responsive style of parenting. Therefore, questions asking when the children eat breakfast or nap may be irrelevant.

ii. Sex and Relationships

“When answering these questions, it was noticeable that she felt uncomfortable and stated that it made her feel sick.”

Social worker assessing mother in child protection case

Questions relating to sex may cause embarrassment and shame amongst some members of the travelling community. For some Gypsies and Travellers, sex is considered a taboo topic. Many Travellers wouldn't expect to be asked questions about sex and may feel caught off guard. If it is necessary to ask questions about sex, give forewarning to the respondent, explain its relevance and account for cultural attitudes towards speaking about sex when analysing the response.

iii. Money

Gypsies and Travellers can sometimes have different ways of managing money which are practical and functional but may not fit social workers' expectations of budgeting. For example, some families budget by buying all of their necessities first and then calculate which luxuries they can afford depending on how much money is left over. This method of budgeting is legitimate and can work well for lots of people.

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Whilst bank cards are considered one of the staples of financial management amongst the settled community, some young members of Gypsy and Traveller communities may not have used one before. Other methods of storing or saving money can work just as well. It is important that lack of knowledge or experience in this area does not negatively impact the final result of child care assessments.

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iv. Communications and Literacy

Although the vast majority of Gypsies and Travellers can speak English, some may have a different way of using the language. This means that words which are considered common may not be recognised. When an assessment is taking place, this can be misleading and create the appearance that the respondents know less than they actually do. Particular care should be taken when using words that aren't used in every day vocabulary e.g. medical terms.

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Inviting a representative with experience of working with the Gypsy and Traveller community to the assessment can be helpful in ensuring the questions in the assessment are understood. Additionally, repeating words, rephrasing questions in different ways and using illustrations may be useful in ensuring the respondent is given a fair chance at answering questions.

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Members of the settled community can express surprise when Gypsy and Travellers respondents provide only brief and to-the-point responses to questions during assessments. Some Gypsy and Traveller respondents may not realise that they are expected to elaborate on their responses and may not be used to communicating in the style expected during assessments. This does not indicate a lack of interest or care. Some members of the Gypsy and Traveller community may be more comfortable with demonstrating their knowledge rather than describing it, so adapting assessments to involve more practical components will help in achieving more accurate results.

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v. Extended family and community

The family takes a place of central importance in Gypsy and Traveller culture and there is a strong emphasis placed on caring for the old and young. Members of the community tend to get married and have children at a younger age than the general population and also have more children¹⁹.

While young parents may be a concern to Children's Services, Gypsy and Traveller family structures can operate differently to accommodate for this. Children in Gypsy and Traveller communities are often brought up not only by the immediate family, but with the support of the extended family and wider community. The wider community will contribute to a child's upbringing; lending their wealth of advice and assistance in childrearing.

“They operate within the extended family system and use this system as an extension of themselves. The family structure is the main source of information, advice and acceptance... The importance of the extended family group should not be underestimated and how differently people operate who are used to living and learning within this structure.”

Gemma Challenger, National Caseworker at Friends, Families and Travellers

When undertaking assessments, it may therefore be insufficient to assess the knowledge and abilities of only the nuclear family. Many females, who tend to be responsible for child rearing, are rarely or never alone and so the knowledge and abilities of other people in the community who share in the child's parenting responsibilities should also be assessed and acknowledged.

19 The Queen's Nursing Institute, Working with Gypsies and Travellers Last accessed: 19 August 2016 <http://www.qni.org.uk/docs/Gypsy%20and%20Travellers%20Handout%20-%20HB%20and%20LC%20Good%20Practice%20Points.pdf>

vi. History of engagement with Children's Services

"I've seen the news and read the stories on the internet. They've made me worry about my children... They think we're stupid and can't take care of ourselves... if social services knock at my door, I won't let them in."

Jonas, father of four and a Roma immigrant from the Czech Republic²⁰

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Undergoing an assessment as part of the child protection process can be a frightening experience for any parent. However, fear and suspicion of Children's Services amongst some members of the Gypsy and Traveller community can be particularly high because of historically difficult relationships with the state and high instances of social services intervention in recent years.

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Whilst the Child Protection process must remain child-centric, it is beneficial for all parties involved if steps are made to ensure that families of at risk children understand that although they are under investigation, it is not Children's Service's intention to work against them. If the family are assured that any assessments undertaken will be fair and give them an ample opportunity to demonstrate their ability and desire to care for their child, they are more likely to be able to communicate effectively with the interviewers.

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²⁰ Simon Cox, Roma children: Britain's hidden care problem, BBC, 20 December 2012 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20770420>



vii. Living arrangements

For many professionals, working with Gypsies and Travellers for the first time means working within a new culture and context. This can be challenging and difficult to navigate and it is normal to have questions. For this reason, a level of cultural competence is important, or at very least, maintaining an open and inquisitive mind.

Case Study

Hannah, a health professional providing outreach services to Gypsies and Travellers contacted the FFT team to discuss her concerns that children in one of the families she was working with were being neglected.

The family lived on a pitch with two caravans and a small space of land in between. Hannah was concerned because the parents slept in one caravan and the children in another. She was worried that the children weren't being supervised sufficiently, placing them at risk of harm.

Staff members at FFT were able to advise Hannah that this was a common practice and didn't indicate child neglect. In practice, the children were no further away from their parents than many children in settled homes and if any issue were to arise, they could quickly get their parents' attention by either making noise or making their way to them.

3. Information sharing and care planning

At this stage in the child protection process, a case conference is called for all professionals working with the child and the family of the child. The goal of the case conference is to share information, identify risks to the child, decide on how to support the family and monitor the child's welfare. This core group will then continue to meet regularly until the child is either no longer considered to be at risk or is placed in care.

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As this group is responsible for monitoring and making decisions on the child's care, it is imperative that members have an understanding of Gypsy and Traveller culture and that the cultural needs of the child are recognised and met.

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WE HAVE COMPILED THE FOLLOWING LIST OF CONSIDERATIONS FOR CARE PLANNING:

i. Extended family and community

When deciding on how to support the family, particular consideration should be given to the extended family and members of the Gypsy and Traveller community. Cemlyn²¹ argues that some Travellers may not need Children's Services departments as much as the settled population because of the level of support received by parents from their extended family and other families on site. Instead, she suggests that in some cases it would be more helpful to support the already existent work of the extended family.

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21 Dr. Colm Power, Room to Roam: England's Irish Travellers, Report of Research Funded by the Community Fund, June 2004
<http://www.statewatch.org/news/2005/feb/Room-to-Roam-England's-Irish-Travellers.pdf>



ii. Culturally appropriate care placements

If at this stage, the Core Group comes to the conclusion that it is in the child's best interest to be removed from their parents, then appropriate arrangements for care should be made. Care placements should seek to provide cultural continuity to the child. Gypsy and Traveller children should be placed in Gypsy and Traveller foster families or residential settings suited to the Gypsy and Traveller lifestyle.

Gypsy and Traveller children placed in settled residential homes or other transcultural foster settings typically experience acculturative distress and absolute social alienation in later years²². Usually, Gypsy and Traveller children who grow up in the Care System develop settled values. Their contact with the travelling community is restricted to their parents who may be frustrated by the systems and processes which have separated them from their children. This means children often don't have the opportunity to engage with the positive aspects of their culture and the child's cultural identity as a Gypsy or Traveller can become a negative one.

By failing to allocate children culturally appropriate care placements, professionals set the child up for double rejection. Firstly, by the settled community who see them as different and secondly by the travelling community who may also consider them as outsiders because of the settled values they adopt²³. This can leave Gypsy and Traveller children socially isolated in later life and therefore more likely to engage in unhealthy or criminal behaviour.

When Gypsy and Traveller children are placed in foster placements within their own community, their cultural identity and customs are preserved during a period of their life which involves huge change and upheaval. This can be a source of comfort and also ensures that children understand their removal from their family doesn't reflect a condemnation of the greater Gypsy and Traveller community of which they are a member²⁴.

22 See footnote 6.

23 Kevin O'Higgins, Travelling children in substitute care, Protecting the Cultural Identity of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children, Surviving childhood adversity, Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1993.

24 See footnote 6.

iii. Nomadic lifestyle

When planning care, the core group should take into account that an important element of Gypsy and Traveller culture is nomadism. Where possible, professionals should make care arrangements which are compatible with a nomadic way of life. Unless there is evidence that the nomadic way of life is harmful to the child, this qualifies as a cultural need which the Core Group should seek to facilitate. As there is a severe shortage of places to pitch in the United Kingdom, some families may be living on unauthorised encampments. If the Core Group feel that this constitutes a risk to the child's welfare or wellbeing, it may be possible to negotiate safer and more appropriate stopping places with the Local Authority's Gypsy and Traveller Liaison Team.

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iv. Parental visits

If a child is removed from their parents, it may be deemed appropriate for the parent to visit the child or send gifts. This can be a source of comfort for both parents and children during a turbulent time.

Case Study

Eileen's child was temporarily removed from her and placed in care. During this time, she was permitted to visit and to send gifts.

When she arrived for the visit, her child arrived late and was taken away early. The reason given was that social services feared that because Eileen was a Gypsy, she and/or her family were likely to kidnap the child.

When Eileen sent gifts, these were returned to her and she was told that there was a fear that the presents contained trackers which would enable the Gypsy and Traveller community to locate and kidnap the child.

This case study illustrates how media representations of Gypsies and Travellers can impact the decision making processes of welfare professionals. On this occasion, there was no evidence to indicate that the looked after child was under any risk of kidnapping. However, negative media representations and the perpetuation of the unfounded myth that Gypsies and Travellers kidnap children limited the access a mother had to her child. It is the duty of professionals in the child protection system to ensure that Gypsies and Travellers receive fair treatment, without racial prejudice and to ensure that instances such as this do not occur. When care planning, unless there is reasonable evidence to indicate that a family is likely to kidnap their child, visitation rights of Gypsy and Traveller parents should be the same as they are for any other parent.

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v. Appearance

For many in the Gypsy and Traveller community, how a child is presented is an expression of how well he or she is cared for. It is expected that if a child is being looked after well, a degree of effort will be put into the child's appearance and he or she may be dressed smartly. Therefore, consideration of how a child is dressed and presented should be taken into account, both to preserve the child's cultural identity and to make it clear to family members that their child is being looked after well.

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As appearance is an important way to express a sense of identity, including cultural identity, efforts should be made not to change the child's appearance. If the child has earrings in, these should be kept in both to respect cultural preferences and to make sure that the holes do not close up. When maintaining the child's hair, it is advised to keep the same style. The tastes and preferences of people in the travelling community may differ from the settled community so decisions affecting this should be made cautiously or in consultation with the parents.

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4. Court proceedings

If the core group is unsuccessful in creating suitable arrangements for the child to live with his or her family, the case will then progress to court. Members of the Gypsy and Traveller community are often resourceful, street-wise and capable. However, some members of the community can struggle to comprehend and navigate bureaucratic processes, such as the care or legal system. Exchanges and transactions in Gypsy and Traveller communities often happen following oral agreement. By depending on oral agreements, Gypsies and Travellers can miss out on the protection that written agreements can provide. This can leave those who rely on oral agreements susceptible to scams. It is important to enquire if extra help is needed in negotiating the courts and legal system. It may be necessary to provide additional assistance or advice in seeking independent legal representation.

Case Study

After a referral was made to Children’s Services, Marie had parental responsibility for her child removed from her. Marie was allocated a local solicitor to represent her interests in court but felt that the solicitor colluded with Children’s Services and didn’t want to use them to represent her. Marie found an advocate online who charged her £1000 to submit a skeleton argument to the court. The advocate failed to submit the skeleton argument and then ignored Marie’s phone calls and emails; this left her out-of-pocket and unrepresented in court.

5. Outcome

As a result of the hearing, an Interim Care Order, Care Order, Placement Order or Adoption Order may be put in place. As above, if parental responsibility is removed from the parents either temporarily or permanently, it is vital to ensure that the new placement or adoptive parents are from the Gypsy and Traveller community and capable of providing cultural continuity. In consideration of potential foster or adoptive parents, placements or adoptions which preserve links to kinship networks, the extended family group and the wider community should take priority.

COMMUNITY SOCIAL WORK: INTERVENTION BEFORE A CRISIS

Until this point, this paper has focused on guidelines for working with Gypsy and Traveller families once they have been referred to Children’s Services because of a child safeguarding issue. The need for cultural competency at this stage is vital. However, by adopting a Community Social Work approach, Children’s Services could develop relationships with Gypsy and Traveller families, identifying issues at an early stage and acting promptly to provide support and prevent problems from escalating.

The Children and Young Persons Act 1963 gave local authorities in England and Wales the task of “diminishing the need to receive children into care”²⁵. In the 1970s, this led to the ‘golden age of prevention’ when statutory and voluntary services engaged with communities, identifying individual needs and providing support when needed. Despite its effectiveness, this approach was deemed too expensive and was phased out²⁶.

Recently, prominent members of the social work field have made calls for a return to a model of Community Social Work which is ‘orientated away from dependence on institutional responses and towards interdependence in community life’²⁷. In this model, people are supported in identifying their own problems, developing responses to these problems and then taking action to resolve them.

Ideally, social workers would engage on an ongoing basis with the Gypsy and Traveller community, developing relationships with families and supporting them in identifying and resolving child welfare issues. By spending time with members of the Gypsy and Traveller community before a crisis occurs, trust and cultural competency are built up.

Opportunities for engagement with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities could exist in helping members of the community access health and education to improve outcomes in these areas.

25 Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, Children and Young Persons Act 1963 <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/acts/1963-children-young-persons-act.pdf>

26 Bob Holman The case for preventive community social work is returning <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/oct/16/social-work-preventive-community> Published: Wednesday 16th October 2013

Lyn Romeo Community social work: the shift from what’s wrong to what’s strong

<https://lynromeo.blog.gov.uk/2016/04/29/community-social-work-the-shift-from-whats-wrong-to-whats-strong/> Published: 29th April 2016



In the context of Children's Services and the Gypsy and Traveller community, this style of social work is particularly useful. It can enable Gypsies and Travellers to identify issues in their own community and come up with culturally appropriate solutions. The wellbeing of children is an issue of mutual interest to Children's Services and the Gypsy and Traveller community. If a Community Social Work model were adopted, Children's Services and the Gypsy and Traveller community could work together on solutions to child wellbeing issues. As a result, Gypsies and Travellers would no longer just be recipients of a Children's Services system designed for the majority, but would instead be agents of change in their own community. Further to this, child wellbeing issues could be identified and tackled at an early stage.

DOMESTIC ABUSE AND CHILD PROTECTION

When developing new approaches to Gypsy and Traveller provision in Children’s Services it is important to contextualise them within a wider social care context. In England, the main reasons for children being taken into care were abuse or neglect (61%), the child’s disability (3%) and the parents’ illness or disability (3%)²⁸. When we consider that available, albeit limited statistics indicate a higher prevalence of domestic violence in Gypsy and Traveller communities²⁹, the disproportionately high presence of Gypsy and Traveller children in care may be related.

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The impact of the high prevalence of domestic violence in the Gypsy and Traveller community is compounded by the fact that there is currently only limited provision of appropriate accommodation for Gypsy and Traveller women wishing to seek refuge. Therefore, women seeking to remove themselves and their children from potentially dangerous situations within the home are often not afforded this opportunity and events can escalate to a point where children are at risk.

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A shortage of appropriate accommodation for Gypsy and Traveller women may mean that they are at higher risk of being placed separately from their children. This may deter women from reporting instances of domestic abuse to the authorities and receiving help. The intervention of social services may be feared and resisted, preventing women and the wider family from receiving support and help.

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If Children’s Services are to address the issue of abuse in the home, it must be tackled at its root and will necessitate collaboration with other sections of social services. This would be aided by a Community Social Work approach which could identify domestic violence at an early stage and signpost those involved towards support services.

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28 House of Commons Library, Children in Care in England: Statistics, Briefing Paper Number 04470, 5 October 2015, Table 1 by Yago Zayed and Rachael Harker.

29 South East Wales Women’s Aid Consortium, Domestic Abuse & Equality, Gypsy + Traveller Women, Briefing 1, October 2010



GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

i. Local authorities responsible for child protection should consider adopting a community social work approach to build up trust with Gypsy and Traveller communities and to build the cultural competency of professionals³⁰.

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ii. Gypsy and Traveller cultural competency training should be mandatory for professionals in Children's Services and throughout the child protection process.

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iii. Professionals working with at risk children should ensure that their knowledge and understanding of Gypsy and Traveller culture is drawn from fair, evidence-based sources.

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iv. Local authorities should be open to discussion on ways of interacting with families and young people, particularly homeless Gypsy and Traveller teenagers³¹. Local authorities should acknowledge that this may work differently than it would with settled individuals. By discussing rules of engagement and agreeing on a communication strategy that works for both parties, this will help to develop reciprocated trust.

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v. Local authorities should provide more facilities which can accommodate women and children from the Gypsy and Traveller community who are fleeing from domestic violence. Currently, many women's refuges cannot cater for Gypsy and Traveller families because of their size and cultural differences. As a result, Gypsy and Traveller women seeking refuge from domestic violence can often have their children separated from them and placed in care. This can discourage women from seeking help. Therefore, the provision of alternative facilities is necessary.

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vi. Local authorities should work to provide more stopping places and sites in the United Kingdom. A chronic shortage of safe and child-friendly spaces to pitch makes access to accommodation difficult. By creating more sites, local authorities will also create more safe and stable environments for children to be raised in.

30 For more information on community social work models for Gypsy and Traveller outreach, read about the work of Haringey Council on the Community Care website: <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2010/06/07/working-with-travellers-and-gypsies/>

31 information on engaging with young, homeless Gypsies and Travellers, read Dr. Colm Power's report, Room to Roam: England's Irish Travellers: <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2005/feb/Room-to-Roam-England's-Irish-Travellers.pdf>





FFT Community Base 113 Queens Road Brighton East Sussex BN1 3XG
Telephone **01273 234 777** Fax **01273 234 778**
fft@gypsy-traveller.org www.gypsy-traveller.org