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A guide for advocates supporting Gypsy and Traveller families experiencing intervention from Children's Services.

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This guide contains an analysis of difficulties experienced by Gypsy and Traveller families when engaging with Children’s Services, as identified by outreach staff and caseworkers at Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT). Each barrier identified is followed by advice on positive practice for dealing with this. The document concludes with an overview of wider systemic issues identified together with other Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups and a short description of the policy efforts currently being made by FFT to achieve the goals of our Children’s Services campaign, which are to:

1. Disclose information illustrating the reasons for the disproportionate numbers of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) children in care, including a break down between Gypsy and Roma children.
2. Raise awareness of the disproportionate numbers of GRT children in care.
3. Disseminate learning from our case work on GRT experiences of Children’s Services to improve decision makers’ knowledge.
4. Improve cultural awareness and practices with GRT families amongst Children’s Services professionals throughout every stage of care proceedings.
5. Suggest potential solutions to improve relations between Children’s Services and GRT communities.

This guide should be used in conjunction with the FFT guide for professionals working with Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in Children’s Services and we recommend that advocates complete FFT’s Online Gypsy and Traveller Cultural Awareness Training.

Positive practice for advocates supporting Gypsy and Traveller families

1. LIAISING WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS

Some parents can struggle to liaise with service providers. During the child protection process, there are a range of professionals involved in proceedings including social workers, solicitors, advocates for the child, psychologists and more. Parents who have approached FFT for help have often struggled to understand the difference between each professional and may consider them all to be working in the same team, opposing the parents.

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POSITIVE PRACTICE: When this issue arises, an advocate should spend time explaining to the client who each of the professionals are and what their role is.

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2. LITERACY AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

Parents who have approached FFT for support can sometimes struggle to understand the information which is being shared with them by the team of professionals around them. For many members of the Gypsy and Traveller communities literacy can be an issue. However, even for parents who can read and write, the language used in support letters, skeleton arguments, appointment letters and other documents unfamiliar. When they go to court, many clients do not understand all of the terminology that is used, making it difficult for them to be sure what actions they should or can make next.

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POSITIVE PRACTICE: An advocate should read and explain written information to the client and accompany them to court, taking notes so that they can explain the information to them afterwards.

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3. ACCESSING SERVICES FOR SUPPORT AND LEARNING

Social workers often advise clients to attend training courses but some parents do not know how to go about finding or enrolling upon these courses and often receive little or no support with this. Many Gypsy and Traveller parents may not have the literacy required to benefit from these courses.

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POSITIVE PRACTICE: An advocate should recommend courses for the client and assist them in registering for these courses. If literacy or other issues could present barriers for clients whilst attending these courses, they may prepare the client with strategies for dealing with this and highlight to the course provider efforts they could make to ensure their course is accessible to the client.



4. ACCESSING LEGAL REPRESENTATION

Gypsy and Traveller parents who approach FFT often find it difficult to find a family law solicitor. For many, this is because they have little idea of how to navigate the system – where and who to go to for help and support. We have come into contact with parents who are only a few days before their final court hearing to decide whether a child is to be adopted and yet have no legal representation. Even when parents find a solicitor, they can often see the solicitor as another opponent, especially when cultural issues arise. Local solicitors often have or are perceived to have a relationship with local social workers. Many Gypsy and Traveller parents would rather have a solicitor from another part of the country as there is a strong suspicion that local solicitors and social workers will collude against the wishes of the parents. We have witnessed a number of cases where solicitors have been enlisted to represent Gypsy and Traveller parents and they have simply gone through the motions, putting no fight to get justice for their clients.

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POSITIVE PRACTICE: An advocate should help clients to find solicitors who are good and who are receptive to or knowledgeable about Gypsy and Traveller culture. Legal representatives should undertake training such as FFT’s Online Gypsy and Traveller Culture Awareness Training and read FFT’s guide for professionals working with Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in Children’s Services.

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5. LANGUAGE

Often Gypsy and Traveller parents incorporate some words or phrases from the Romanes, Cant or Gammon languages into their conversation with professionals. For example, we have worked with mothers who refer to their children as “tickners”, a Romanes word, and who are not aware that this isn’t a commonly understood word in English. When the client uses these words, their meaning is lost to professionals they are engaging with and communication isn’t as good as it could be. This is not an issue if professionals stop and clarify what words mean, but many professionals fail to recognise these words as Romanes, Cant or Gammon and do not take time to clarify their meaning.

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POSITIVE PRACTICE: An advocate should help to translate what the parents are saying in Romanes, Cant or Gammon. If this is not possible, the advocate could highlight the likelihood of the parents using Romanes, Cant or Gammon words to the relevant professionals and urge them to sensitively ask for clarification if they do not understand a word.

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6. ENSURING FATHER'S INCLUSION

Many multi-agency meetings attended by parents who are going through care proceedings tend to have many more women in attendance than men. An FFT advocate found that when Gypsy and Traveller fathers attend these meetings, then often only the mother speaks and the father remains quiet. This can be misinterpreted as the father not being as involved with raising the children or an unwillingness to engage, but often, the father may simply be finding the experience daunting.

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POSITIVE PRACTICE: An advocate should help to prepare the father for the likelihood of being around a table with mainly women. The advocate could ask the father specific questions or could highlight this issue with other professionals and encourage them to take a more proactive approach to communicating with the father.

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7. PREJUDICE

Prejudice and bias against the Gypsy and Traveller communities is common and can often go unquestioned, even in professional contexts. Whilst racism and discrimination can sometimes manifest in obvious and clear cut ways, they can also be found in more subtle forms. Whilst in theory, Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers are defined as ethnic groups and protected from discrimination under the Equality Act 2010, this does not always mean that this is the reality or lived experience of Gypsy and Traveller families. We know from our national casework that experiences of discrimination and poorer outcomes from public services are common for members of the Gypsy and Traveller communities and that transparency helps to identify discrimination and in tackling it. This is a particular issue for Gypsies and Traveller families experiencing Children's Services intervention because of the secretive nature of the Family Courts.

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POSITIVE PRACTICE: An advocate should help to support the client to challenge any incorrect or prejudicial statements or actions – either through constructive conversation with the professionals involved or through legal processes. Advocates should work to recognise and challenge discrimination when it arises.

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8. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

In many of FFT's Children's Services cases, domestic violence has been an underlying issue or the primary reason a family have been referred to Children's Services. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that domestic violence is increasingly considered an influential factor in child protection cases across all communities, even amongst parents who have made steps to safeguard their children against it.

POSITIVE PRACTICE: When an advocate is working with a victim of domestic violence, they should urge them to stick to their personal safety plan as drawn up by domestic violence specialists and also to proactively address issues of concern around domestic violence as a priority in their work with Children's Services professionals. If there are suggestions on a personal safety plan which do not match with the lifestyle or culture of a Gypsy or Traveller victim of domestic violence e.g. travelling, this should be highlighted and an alternative suggestion should be made.

9. BIAS IN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENTS AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

Children's Services professionals may request that parents undergo psychological assessments to help determine if they have any issues which could negatively impact their ability to parent. Diagnoses can then be used in court proceedings as evidence. Failure to comply can sometimes be perceived as unwillingness to engage. In our experience supporting clients, psychologists are usually chosen and allocated by the families' social workers. Many families feel that psychologists commissioned by social workers are influenced by the social workers' perceptions of the parents and seek to provide evidence which supports the social worker's case. Many psychologists used do not have understanding or experience of Gypsy and Traveller culture and this can inhibit their ability to engage with clients and therefore may make it more difficult to make an assessment.

POSITIVE PRACTICE: An advocate should support the client to present an argument to access an independent psychologist who does not have a relationship with local Children's Services professionals. This means they will be more likely to receive a fair assessment and that they may even be able to select a psychologist who has an understanding of Gypsy and Traveller culture. Psychologists should undertake training such as FFT's Online Gypsy and Traveller Culture Awareness Training to improve their knowledge on Gypsy and Traveller culture.

10. CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE CARE ARRANGEMENTS

When a decision is made to place children in care, outreach and caseworkers at FFT have found that little emphasis is put on placing children in the care of someone from the Gypsy and Traveller communities. In one case, a number of potential carers were put forward for a child, only one of whom was not from the travelling communities. Despite this, Children's Services selected this individual to be the foster carer for the child. In our casework and support work, advocates from FFT have noticed that carers are often decided in one short session by Children's Services professionals. This is often an insufficient amount of time to consider large extended families, which are common in Gypsy and Traveller communities. When looking for carers outside of the extended family, Children's Services professionals often say that information on Gypsy or Traveller ethnicity is not stored on their system, so they do not have the data available to allocate Gypsy and Traveller foster carers on request. It is notable that the long-term impact of removing a child from his/her culture and community is rarely recognised as a factor when assessing the best interests of the child.

POSITIVE PRACTICE: An advocate should aim to build a good relationship up with social workers and to highlight the importance of placing the child in a culturally appropriate care arrangement, explaining the significance of the extended family in Gypsy and Traveller culture and ask that this be reflected in both the decisions made for care arrangements and in the length of the decision meeting. Advocates should recommend that health and social care bodies record ethnicity as a matter of practice so that services for Gypsies and Travellers are effectively commissioned. If the child is placed with a foster carer outside of the Gypsy and Traveller communities, they should undertake training such as FFT's Online Gypsy and Traveller Culture Awareness Training and read FFT's guide for professionals working with Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in Children's Services to improve their knowledge on Gypsy and Traveller culture.



11. CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE CHILD

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”; however, lack of recognition of Gypsy and Traveller cultural identity means that some judges, social workers and other professionals consider that the act of merely reading a book to the child on Gypsy and Traveller culture is a sufficient effort to meet this criteria. There is little recognition of the other ways culture and cultural habits manifest themselves. For example, professionals with little Gypsy and Traveller cultural awareness may fail to recognise that:

- How a child is presented and dressed is considered an expression of how well they are cared for in Gypsy and Traveller culture and that appearance is an important part of cultural expression.
- Sending children to horse riding classes as a replacement for attendance at Horse Fairs is a decision uninformed by the reality that horse fairs have a far greater social significance for Gypsy and Traveller communities than just the horses present.
- Food consumed in Gypsy and Traveller homes may differ from other homes in the population, just as you would anticipate with other cultures.

POSITIVE PRACTICE: If there is no possibility that children are placed with a Gypsy or Traveller family, an advocate should advise on ways carers can respect, recognise, support and celebrate the child’s cultural background. Foster carers should undertake training such as FFT’s Online Gypsy and Traveller Culture Awareness Training and read FFT’s guide for professionals working with Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in Children’s Services to improve their knowledge on Gypsy and Traveller culture.

Points to note:

- Many clients get in touch with FFT's advice and support workers because they have heard from another client who has had a good experience. Referrals are best when based upon trusting relationships and when they come from someone within the Gypsy and Traveller communities.
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- The importance of Gypsy and Traveller cultural awareness amongst professionals should not be overlooked or downplayed. Whilst many of the positive practice strategies of our advocates seek to address a deficit of Gypsy and Traveller cultural awareness, the more embedded this cultural awareness is within the Child Protection process, the more effective it will be. Any advocate supporting a Gypsy or Traveller family through the Child Protection process should always advise any professionals working with the family to increase their knowledge and understanding of Gypsy and Traveller culture. We particularly recommend that professionals undertake training such as FFT's Online Gypsy and Traveller Culture Awareness Training and read FFT's guide for professionals working with Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in Children's Services. In one case we worked on, the Chair of the Child Protection Meeting was very knowledgeable on Gypsy and Traveller culture and this produced positive outcomes across the board and meant that the family were more able to engage in the child's care plan. We feel that this contributed to the positive outcome achieved overall. As many parents will not be able to access a local Gypsy or Traveller advocate or may not be aware that this exists, it is important that this knowledge and skillset is mainstreamed and embedded within the Child Protection and Care Proceedings process.
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Wider systemic issues identified together with other BAME groups.

We have read information from and engaged in dialogue with parents and activists from other BAME groups, many of whom felt that they could identify similar issues as we have. Some of the shared issues we identified were:

- The 26 week timetable for care proceedings is too short and does not leave time to address issues in social services provision and knowledge when they do arise.
- Austerity measures limit the ability of social workers to provide support and early days interventions.
- The care proceedings system is complex and designed for literate people. Those with limited or no literacy will have difficulty at every step.
- In a number of cases, parents have been accused of things which have later been proven to be untrue, but their children have already been taken from them and placed into care. In a number of cases, it appears that Children's Services professionals are using emergency care orders in non-emergency situations.
- Parents are sometimes contacted late in the evening and informed that court proceedings determining whether their children will be removed from them will commence early the next morning. This leaves parents no time to get legal representation and even if they have a legal representative, it is likely that their chosen legal representative will already be in court or busy.
- Sometimes paperwork from Children's Services and the court doesn't reach the client until the day they are due in court. Therefore, the client has no chance to read and understand the allegations against them and therefore cannot prepare a case against it.
- Anecdotal evidence would suggest that domestic violence is increasingly considered an influential factor in child protection cases, even amongst parents who have made steps to safeguard their children against it. Many victims of domestic violence feel that they are being punished for disclosing information to authorities and are also fearful that if they do seek help, their children will be removed from them. A better strategy must be devised to ensure domestic violence victims do not suffer if they disclose information and make steps to protect their children.

FFT Children's Services Campaign

Whilst we continue to support clients from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities who are currently experiencing Children's Services intervention, we also are working to challenge the underlying issues at a national policy level. Some of these efforts have been ongoing since 2016, whilst some are in the pipeline. We have therefore produced details on our key policy aims and some information on how they look/will look in action.

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Aims:

1. To disclose information illustrating the reasons for the disproportionate numbers of GRT children in care, including a break down between Gypsy and Roma children.
 - We will ask for an enquiry into the disproportionate number of Gypsies and Travellers in care.

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2. To raise awareness of the disproportionate numbers of GRT children in care.
 - We will raise awareness of this issue through events and publications, by engaging with key public figures and the press.

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3. To disseminate learning from FFT case work on GRT experiences of Children's Services to improve decision makers' understanding of the issue.
 - We will highlight the problem and suggest ways it can be overcome, using our own experiences and the experiences of FFT clients.

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4. To improve cultural awareness and practices with GRT families amongst Children's Services professionals.
 - We will produce and disseminate positive practice and advice on engaging with GRT communities through professional networks.

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5. To suggest potential solutions to improve relations between Children's Services and GRT communities.
 - We will work in collaboration with other BAME groups to tackle systemic issues and produce potential solutions to these issues.

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