

GUIDANCE FOR STAFF WORKING IN PRISONS



**FRIENDS,
FAMILIES &
TRAVELLERS**

The importance of disclosing Romany Gypsy or Irish Traveller ethnicities

“They just hear my accent and put me down as White Irish.”

“If there was something in reception that would help us feel safe, or staff asked us instead of assuming we are White British or White Irish. When you first come in you don’t know and it’s all confusion and rush.”

“We need someone doing mediation and anger management would help but it would have to be someone who understands our ways.”



Good Practice guidance

- Ensure staff on duty in reception and induction areas present new arrivals with all the ethnic categories on the P-Nomis system, including Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller W3 option.
- Explain the purpose of ethnicity recording so individuals understand that disclosure helps ensure appropriate support.
- Use recognisable visuals to help make Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller young adults feel recognised and supported. You could use the Roma flag or Irish Traveller flag.
- Provide additional support where literacy, language or anxiety creates barriers to completing forms or understanding available options.
- If people disclose their ethnicity make them aware of the name of the Traveller Rep and what wing they are on, along with any other relevant support services as early as possible.
- Consider cultural factors which may be linked with ethnicity. E.g. the importance of the wider family to young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people.

The vital role of Traveller Reps in prisons

“He’s a real inspiration to me.”

“A Rep is really important to us. Its familiarity, someone else from your own community who understands you, gets where you come from, your shared sense of humour. We wouldn’t really talk that much to someone who wasn’t one of us, they wouldn’t understand what it’s like to be us.”

“You won’t see many Travellers on Enhanced; they don’t seem to let us.”



Good Practice guidance

- Consult the cohort before appointing a Traveller Rep to ensure the individual has the trust and confidence of their peers.
- Facilitate early contact between new arrivals and the Traveller Rep, ideally during induction or as soon as possible afterwards. If Reps are not able to access reception or induction areas, give them intake lists or tell them if someone new has ticked W3.
- Recognise Traveller Reps as an important wellbeing resource, whilst ensuring they receive appropriate support and understand the limits of the role.
- Review barriers to trusted prisoner roles, ensuring that literacy, educational attainment or assumptions about ethnicity do not unfairly prevent Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller young adults from becoming Representatives.
- Meet regularly with Traveller Reps to identify emerging issues, improve communication and co-produce solutions. Liaise with them about events and meetings.

How Chaplaincy provides wellbeing and practical support

“It’s like an oasis of calm from the chaos.”

“It’s just so important to us, especially in here. We go to service once a week then have some time to socialise. The bible studies group is really good, every week about half an hour of bible chatting about the passage then we get to have a bit of a chat. You feel better after, you know, calmer.”

“Chaplaincy were really good a couple of weeks ago when it was my grandad’s funeral. They contacted my family and set up a video link and sorted that out, got someone there to live record the service. That meant a lot. Prison staff just don’t sort that stuff out in time.”



Good Practice guidance

- Help to establish a relationship with prison chaplains and Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller young adults. Having a trusted chaplain can prevent negative experiences which are often easily resolved.
- Liaise with prison chaplaincy to identify staff or volunteers with experience of Romany and Irish Traveller communities, ensuring culturally informed pastoral support is available.
- Ensure approved religious items are provided without unnecessary delay, recognising their importance to wellbeing and emotional resilience.
- Use chaplaincy as part of compassionate case management, particularly where prisoners are experiencing bereavement, family illness or significant emotional distress.
- Develop partnerships with specialist community organisations such as the ICPO or the Gypsy Friendly Churches that can provide culturally appropriate pastoral care, faith resources and ongoing support before and after release.

Accessible Education for Romany Gypsy or Irish Traveller young adults

“Stepping in that classroom, it’s just trauma”

“I won’t go. It feels like stepping into a spaceship for the first time, it feels like daycare, and brings back all the trauma I had at school. We wouldn’t put ourselves in that position, it’s too difficult.”

“Confidence is a big thing, we don’t like asking for help....It’s really embarrassing to go into a group of people when you can’t read or write, so I wouldn’t do it.”



Good Practice guidance

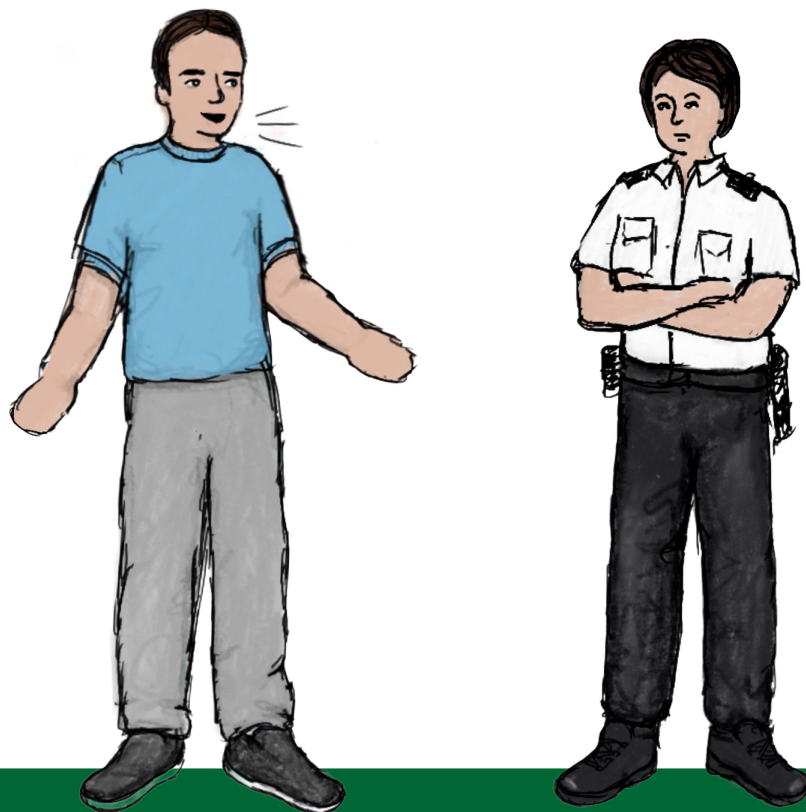
- Offer one-to-one or small-group learning for those who find classrooms overwhelming or retraumatising, using trauma-informed approaches that build confidence and participation.
- Provide access to practical and vocational qualifications, alongside literacy and numeracy support, to reflect individuals' strengths, interests and employment aspirations.
- Refer individuals for neurodiversity assessment where appropriate, ensure reasonable adjustments are in place, and involve Neurodiversity staff to provide additional support.
- Recognise family business experience and practical skills as valuable assets, using these strengths to encourage engagement with rehabilitation and education rather than focusing solely on academic deficits.
- Work with specialist organisations such as the Shannon Trust to provide personalised literacy support in settings where individuals feel safe and able to learn.

Communication in body and language

“When we get passionate about things we get expressive, it’s not aggression.”

“People don’t believe us when we talk about our lives, but we make bold statements because we live bold lives.”

“The staff keep telling us to calm down but it’s not that we are angry, it’s just the way we communicate.”



Good Practice guidance

- Do not assume that raised voices, expressive gestures or passionate communication indicate aggression. Consider cultural communication styles and assess behaviour in context before responding.
- Provide cultural inclusivity training for frontline staff to improve understanding of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communication styles and reduce avoidable conflict.
- Work closely with Neurodiversity Officers and Equalities staff where communication difficulties arise, recognising that undiagnosed neurodevelopmental conditions may influence presentation.
- Use calm, respectful communication and clarification to establish intent before escalating incidents or initiating disciplinary procedures.
- Review use of force cases or incidents where behaviour has been interpreted as aggressive to identify whether cultural misunderstandings or neurodiversity may have contributed to the outcome.

Them and Us: Cultural Separation in prison

“They say it’s banter, but it hurts”

“It’s really important we get to see our peers sometimes, so having more of us on one wing is good for our morale you know. We chat with anyone of course, but only another one of our kind really gets us.”

“There was a lot of anxiety when I first came in but I won’t engage with anyone about it: you just say you’re okay and anyway you can’t confide in others who’s not one of us, cos they don’t understand.”



Good Practice guidance

- Ensure all staff understand that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller are protected ethnic groups and that racist language, including the P-word, is unacceptable and should be challenged.
- Avoid collective terms such as "you lot" or othering language that stereotypes Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners as a group.
- Where appropriate, support positive peer relationships by recognising the wellbeing benefits of trusted community connections and avoiding unnecessary separation.
- Apply rules and supervision consistently, ensuring Romany and Irish Traveller prisoners are not disproportionately challenged for behaviour that would be accepted from others.
- Treat every DIRF seriously, maintain confidentiality throughout the process and communicate outcomes so individuals know their concerns have been heard and addressed.
- Use discrimination reports as opportunities for organisational learning, identifying patterns and taking action to improve culture, accountability and trust.

Creating opportunities for positive engagement through group and activities

“Sometimes we would just like a chat and a cuppa together.”

“More events with our traditional food would be great. Our family day last year was good.”

“The gym here is really good so we use that a lot and it also helps with our heads as well as physical stuff, makes you feel good.”



Good Practice guidance

- To reduce isolation and support wellbeing, work with Traveller Representatives to co-design informal gatherings, forums and cultural events that reflect the priorities of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller young adults.
- Celebrate key Gypsy, Roma and Traveller awareness dates through inclusive, prisoner-led activities that promote cultural pride, including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month, Irish Traveller Awareness Day, Roma Holocaust Memorial Day and Roma Resistance Day.
- Offer culturally relevant activities such as shadow boxing when contact sport is not allowed.
- Ensure equitable access to gyms, physical activity and recreational opportunities, recognising their importance for mental health and emotional wellbeing.
- Address reports of discriminatory treatment promptly, ensuring all staff working in recreational areas apply rules consistently and respectfully.

Gender Specific Issues for young Romany and Irish Traveller Women

“We would never talk about that to a man.”

“That is a big problem. I needed some things for my period, and I was too ashamed to ask the male staff and I kept asking for a female staff so I could ask but he didn’t let me. I felt really embarrassed. We just wouldn’t talk to men about that, or anything like that.”

“We find it hard and it feels wrong to talk to male staff about women’s things, in our culture we just don’t do that, and it feels very wrong. But here, we get asked things by male staff that make us want to die inside, it’s so disrespectful! But if you ask for a woman instead, they won’t listen.”



Good Practice guidance

- Ensure staff understand the cultural needs of young Romany and Irish Traveller women and make female staff available if requested.
- Respect that young women from these communities will not openly discuss certain subjects that are specific to their gender.
- Ensure equal treatment and a sensitive approach is given during family days. If possible, put on family days specifically for Romany and Irish Traveller people (men or women).
- Liaise with third sector groups who may already produce culturally sensitive materials around subjects that may usually be taboo for community members, such as sexual health, breast cancer, menopause etc, that women feel is accessible and appropriate.

Probation and coming up to parole/release

"I just don't know what is going to happen and it's really stressful every day."

"I am out next week but I have heard nothing. I have no idea what is going to happen when I get out that gate!"

"I don't think probation workers understand our culture at all, it feels like a blockage and it feels like you can't live life how you used to and what your culture is now. It's like they have stopped our culture."



Good Practice guidance

- Provide regular communication from the Offender Management Unit throughout sentence planning and in the weeks leading up to release, even where there are no substantive updates.
- Explain licence conditions in plain language, checking understanding and providing opportunities for individuals to ask questions without fear of judgement.
- Consider the impact of licence conditions on cultural and family life, seeking proportionate and workable solutions wherever operationally possible.
- Ensure release planning reflects cultural needs, including accommodation, family relationships, employment and community connections.
- Recognise that uncertainty around release can significantly affect mental health, and provide additional reassurance and support for individuals experiencing heightened anxiety.
- Promote culturally informed practice within offender management and probation, ensuring staff understand how Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller cultural traditions may affect resettlement and rehabilitation.



**FRIENDS,
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