

# Let's face it – travellers need drug services

Travellers and gypsies are probably the ultimate hard to reach group. But they are at risk from drug problems like anyone else and need sympathetic professionals to turn to. **Donnamarie Donnelly** highlights some of the rules of engagement

**N**ORTH Nottinghamshire has one of the oldest Romany gypsy communities in Britain, dating back to the 16th century. As a Young Persons Drug Service we work in a very 'out there' manner. About two and a half years ago I recognised that we were not seeing young people from within the travelling community. However it was difficult to know where to start as the Romany community in the main do not access mainstream services, not least because of the hostility they face at every turn in our society. Jimi was the main Young Persons Drug Worker for this district – and also a black male. Both he and I were unsure what impact this would have in trying to make contact with the community. But what we thought might be a problem turned out to be the key that helped unlock the door.

## COFFEE BREAKTHROUGH

A coffee bar opened near the travellers' site and became a venue where Jimi was able to meet young people. On one such occasion some young men from the travellers' site turned up. Jimi talked to them about his life and experiences as a teenager within his culture and the changes that occurred as a result of his moving to England. It became clear to Jimi and the young men that they had some shared beliefs, such as respect for parents and elders, the respective roles of men and women within the communities and the stigmatisation of the community as a whole. Although initially hesitant the young people started to talk about their own experiences with drugs.

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## GO LARGE

But if we were to build relationships with a wider group of young people we had to gain access to more than just the small group who visited the coffee bar. At this time Jimi also visited the nursery school on site, commonly known as the 'little school'. He was approached by Vicky, one of the mothers from the site. She wanted more information on drugs and believed that other mothers would also like information. From this, six drug awareness sessions were held in the familiar environment of 'the little school'. All participants were given a 'certificate of achievement' at the end of the sessions. Many of these women said it was the first time they had a piece of paper to prove they had achieved anything. They all wanted their picture taken with their certificates and also arranged a social event to thank us for the training. Also the women were happy for us to approach their children and discuss our role and what the Service could offer them. This has led to some young people receiving regular confidential support from Face It.

## OUT AND ABOUT

The women gave their permission to take a small group to the UK Youth Festival of Fun. This was a huge achievement, as mothers do not like their children to be off site overnight unless it is to stay with family. The young people were able to socialize with others from all over the UK, including other young travellers. A successful bid has been made to the Children's Fund to enable the provision of a portakabin on site to become a resource centre for young people. Employed workers will provide a variety of activities, with other agencies including ourselves having sessional time.







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## LESSONS LEARNT

### 1

**Take your service to them**  
Do not wait for travellers to come to you, because they won't

### 2

**Word of mouth is very effective**

But also advertise your services within the travelling community. Take into account literacy skills when using promotional material such as posters & cards. Do not assume all Romanies can/cannot read; ensure that material used is accessible

### 3

**Persevere**

You are an outsider and will always remain one.

See page 9 for Vicky's story

## SERVICE PROVISION

As this is a small close-knit community people know each other; respect this. Remember this when working on site or across other sites and consider how to offer a confidential service.

Their cultural and religious beliefs will inform how they engage with you. We have experienced Romanies as being very superstitious. Be aware of the language used by Romanies – for example you will always be a 'gorger', a non-traveller.

Be prepared to share more of yourself. People will want to know more about you, your beliefs and your values. You do have more to prove.

Acknowledge the different expectations of gender roles. This is evident in children from a very early age. It will inform how Romanies will engage with you and should inform how you engage with them.

Do not assume they are dirty, thieves or wastrels, and accept hospitality in the manner in which it is offered. We have experienced Romanies as being extremely proud people. They have a great sense of tradition, family and community spirit, but have experience of people looking down their noses at them. Their homes are immaculate; the trailers are cleaned top to bottom daily. The young men insisted on checking if Jim had washed his hands before sitting down to eat with him. They wanted to know why other young people do not change their clothes everyday. The first thing to be packed was their shoe polish.

Their contact may be seasonal due to the transient nature of a gypsy lifestyle, so make use of the time you

have with them. Establish if they have plans to move on, and plan for this.

Establish appropriate methods of correspondence. How effective is the use of letters for appointments if you do not have a fixed address?

Build links with other services in other areas which have a travelling population. Due to the connections between our two communities we have established links with the Cambridge travelling community. Partnership work is key, particularly with regards to the transfer of care and continuation of treatment.

As a male worker you will not be invited into a trailer without a male member of the family present if you are visiting a female. As a female worker consider how a male will engage with you. When working with a female be aware of the timing of the appointments; due to their routine lunchtime may be better. Consider the impact of her childcare, and her husband's and families' expectations of her role.

Due to the transient nature of their lifestyle they may not have accessed health checks etc. Romanies may not be registered with GPs, so establish links with healthcare providers etc.

Consider how difficult it is to maintain a detox regime when you are living in a trailer with your neighbour in another trailer 18 ft away.

As the community develops a trusting relationship with you they may look to you to meet all their needs. It is therefore necessary to be clear about what you can/can't do. Advocate your other partner agencies, but be aware this may be a slow process.