

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y [Pwyllgor Iechyd a Gofal Cymdeithasol](#) ar [Deintyddiaeth](#)

This response was submitted to the [Health and Social Care Committee](#) consultation on [Dentistry](#)

D 14

Ymateb gan: | Response from: Gypsies & Travellers Wales



RESPONSE TO DENTISTRY CONSULTATION

INTRODUCTION

As an organisation we work directly to support our clients from the Gypsy and Traveller communities across Cardiff and Vale, Newport and Torfaen. We have a dedicated team of support workers and our offices in Trowbridge Community Centre is central to the area of Cardiff where our clients live and work. Our advice line and social media platforms offer alternative ways of reaching out for support and our workers are often out on site at Rover Way and Shirenewton to engage directly with families. We also work with the many community members who are living in the area in bricks and mortar accommodation.

Through our engagement with the Gypsy and Traveller communities we know that there are huge inequalities with regard to being able to access dentistry services. Generally, many children from these communities have never visited a dentist at all. Education around the care of teeth in terms of regular brushing and diet is often something children (and in many cases adults) are unaware of. One of the reasons behind this is that as many children from Gypsy and Traveller communities have not attended full time and long-term mainstream education, they may have missed out on the lessons other children receive throughout school years, about how to look after teeth and what causes tooth decay etc.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

There has been little formal research into the oral health needs of Gypsies and Travellers, with only a few examples of localised reports in England and Scotland,¹ although the research carried out in these projects correlates with the anecdotal evidence gained from our local communities and through

¹ See Footnotes Section

engagement with Gypsies and Travellers on a wider scale. All travelling communities face similar issues when trying to access services such as dentistry. The communities included under this bracket are ethnic Romany Gypsies, Irish Travellers, Showpeople, New Travellers, as well as emerging nomadic communities such as Liveaboard Boaters and Van Dwellers. The main issues are;

1. Lack of accessible, culturally appropriate information.
2. Distrust and negative attitudes – from the services and the community themselves.
3. A historical neglect of dental health services in reaching out to the Travelling community.
4. Raised levels of fear and anxiety about visiting the dentist.
5. A transient population.
6. Financial issues.

1) Lack of accessible, culturally appropriate information

Children and young people find out about good dental care and how to keep gums and teeth healthy during school years. Lessons around regular brushing, low sugar intake, tooth decay and gum disease are taught throughout mainstream education. However, many children from Gypsy and Traveller communities miss out on this opportunity to learn about dental care as they often are not able to attend full time education or attend a full education from the ages of 4 to 16 years old. This is due to factors such as parents keeping children from attending school due to fear of or incidents of bullying or discrimination (such as they may have received in past years); difficulties with getting children to and from school; schools not accepting pupils from Gypsy and Traveller backgrounds as it affects their general attendance records; children not attending secondary stage education for cultural reasons.

Along with lack of attendance comes issues with low literacy and not becoming familiar with the terminology associated with good dental hygiene. Learning comes from the family and community around them. Leaflets about dental care will not be accessible to many children. Placing information about dental care in places such as libraries or even GP surgeries where Gypsy and Traveller families may not usually visit will mean they will not see or be able to fully understand this information. Generally, for adults and young people alike there may be a fear of the language and processes involved with dental services, which they do not understand and therefore are scared to engage with.

Solutions

Create interesting and accessible ways to teach Gypsy and Traveller children about good dental hygiene. Use social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Facebook and Instagram etc to post visual resources and videos in places where young people will see them.

2) Distrust and negative attitudes – from the services and the community themselves

One negative experience suffered by Gypsies and Travellers will be spread throughout the local community and will make people fearful and reluctant to re-engage with services. Better understanding of the communities' needs and culture makes for a more welcoming experience for patients and practitioners. We hear examples of situations where missed appointments mean that entire families are struck off lists and can never access dentistry services thereafter. Often, families with young children will need to attend appointments as mum's have no other childcare and it is usual to take all the children out at once. We hear of examples where families have been denied future appointments because dentist surgeries have complained about children being in waiting rooms. There may also be cultural issues and fears around women and children receiving dentistry treatment

from male practitioners. We hear of families being denied registration or access to emergency dental services due to lack of local address or being NFA (no fixed abode). Due to low literacy and low confidence, many people from Gypsy and Traveller communities may not be able to fill in registration forms and be scared to ask for help with this, so they find it easier to not register.

Solutions

Ensuring all staff at dentist surgeries receive some cultural training about Gypsies and Travellers and are aware of the needs and issues faced by the community that have relevance in this context.

3) A historical neglect of dental health services in reaching out to the Travelling community

This may be because of financial issues and cuts to outreach services, or through lack of cultural understanding and inappropriate ways of engagement or inaccessible literature. Trust needs to be earned and this may take some time. Gypsy and Traveller sites are often located in out of the way areas or hidden away on the margins of towns, so are not always physically close to dental services. Previously engagement and dental hygiene lessons that may have been delivered by Traveller Education Services, which no longer exist, as these services have been cut from local authorities. Those trusted links have since disappeared. Services may not know how to successfully engage with settled Gypsies and Travellers or more nomadic travelling communities, and services are not tailored to include NFA patients, which means further barriers for those communities.

Solutions

Use trusted contacts into the community such as midwives, health visitors or specialist Gypsy and Traveller advocacy organisations to start engagement with Gypsy and Traveller communities and find out what local communities' needs are. Look for models of good practices that have worked in other areas. For example, some bespoke services offered to the homeless community may also have aspects that could be applied to services for Gypsies and Travellers.

4) Raised levels of fear and anxiety about visiting the dentist

As previously mentioned, some fears could be cultural, or historical. New experiences can be frightening for anyone and dentistry is a very personal and often invasive practice. This will be more so for communities that have issues around distrust of mainstream services. Use of jargon and unfamiliar words makes some people worried and unsure of what is actually happening and what the issues are, and many people fear they have lost control of what might happen to them if referrals or further treatment is required. In these instances, it is easier to disengage after initial appointments.

Solutions

Time is precious during consultations but staff and practitioners need to be aware about using jargon and assuming everyone knows the procedures around dental care, additional treatments and referrals. Producing visual or audio media about how the system works can ease fears and lead to better understanding, meaning more engagement and less missed appointments.

5) A Transient Population

Many Gypsies and Travellers live on permanent sites, or in bricks and mortar so will have a local address and be able to sign up and visit a dentist when they need to. However, there are still many people who are fully nomadic, and either travel around the country all year, and who may have no address, or a care of address in another county. Appointment waiting time for repeat treatment may also be missed if the waiting time is too long and people need to move on.

Solutions

Better and regular training for practice staff so as to ensure they understand how to cater for transient patients, including faster appointments for repeat treatment to ensure people get some extra dental care when issues are identified.

Local Services

The Designed to Smile service engages with residents of the Shirenewton site in east Cardiff. This is a service aimed with the pre-school children at the Flying Start base they have on site. Here, children have engaged with the Toothbrushing programme for a number of years pre-Covid which has also been enforced in daily life by staff members who lived on site.

Depending on which school they attend after pre-school, children will be able to access the Fluoride varnish programme. This service offers an examination of dental health and if needed a letter advising the parents/guardians to attend a dentist for full examinations. The children in primary schools who engage with the programme are also offer oral health talks.

Some local Gypsy and Traveller families are seen in a mobile dental unit when the unit visit's Splott area. The service is run by Cardiff and Vale community dental services though it is not known how families access the service and who initially refers each individual into the service.

A survey carried out by Gypsies & Travellers Wales prior to submitting this response found that many community members would like mobile dental services to continue, with drop in options for initial consultations. Outreach is also a popular option for making that all important first line of contact, and to build trusting relationships with the community. The Designed to Smile programme appears to have gained that trust and expansion onto the other site at Rover Way or at a nearby hub would be of great benefit to that community.

Regarding the issue of finance, there is no doubt Gypsies and Travellers are really feeling the impact of the energy crisis and many families suffer the consequences of fuel poverty every winter. Regular dentist appointments are not a luxury many can afford. With this in mind, a programme of education aimed at this marginalised community and better access to emergency treatment would be beneficial and help younger people understand better how to take care of their teeth.

Gypsies & Travellers Wales would be happy to work with community dental services to help improve services and engagement for our local client group.

FOOTNOTES

1. *'Oral health care in the lives of Gypsy Travellers in east Hertfordshire.'* 1997. D.M Edwards, R.G Watt Department of Public Health, Bedfordshire Health, Luton
'A Collaborative Programme to Improve the Oral Health of the Gypsy and Travelling Communities in Sussex' 2010. Friends Families and Travellers, with NHS Sussex.
'How practices can facilitate access for the gypsy traveller community'. 2018. E. G. Walshaw & A. Ireland
'Managing Barriers to Gypsy and Traveller Engagement With Dental Services'. 2017. University of Dundee