

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Grant gwella addysg: Plant Sipsiwn, Roma a Theithwyr, a phlant o leiafrifoedd ethnig | Education Improvement Grant: Gypsy, Roma and Traveller, and Minority Ethnic Children

EIG 21

Ymateb gan : Neath Port Talbot GRT Forum

Response from : Neath Port Talbot GRT Forum

I am a consultant Social Worker with Neath Port Talbot Social Services, and as part of my developmental role, I have helped establish a local Gypsy Traveller forum. The forum is currently made up of a range of professionals who are keen to develop better links with and services for our Gypsy Traveller community.

The forum was established in November 2015 and is still in its development phase. Membership involves Health Visitors Service, Child and Family Social Workers, Team Around the Family Workers, Action for Children, Youth Services, the Traveller Education Service, CAB, Traveller liaison Officer for the County and other NGOs such as Traveller Ahead and NPT- CVS. Over the next year we want to see the membership of the forum to include representatives of the GRT Community and Adult Services.

In Neath Port Talbot, we have a good take up of Primary School but a low take up of Secondary School placements with only four out twenty four young people of Secondary School age in formal education.

As the committee will no doubt hear, there is a long standing challenge in engaging Gypsy Travellers in full time education. This challenge is driven by several factors, such as: –

Cultural belief – As is well documented many Traveller families believe that ‘in their culture’ teenage boys should start work with their fathers and teenage girls should learn about keeping a good home with their mothers. While many families now support primary education as they believe that their children should read and write, the benefits of secondary education is less valued. Part of the lack of confidence in Secondary Education is born out of the parents own education history, having left school after primary education themselves. There is also a lack of role models from the GRT community who can demonstrate the value of secondary education.

Fear of discrimination – Many families will recount their own experience of being discriminated against and fear racist abuse against their children. Where Traveller families whose children attend small primary schools, particularly those primary school that have built good links with the local Traveller sites, the fear of racism is reduced and attendance is positive. However, the move to Secondary school presents a greater threat, in that the school population is bigger, with many of those pupils from other feeder primary schools with no experience of the Traveller community and therefore the risk of discrimination against Traveller pupils increases.

In Neath Port Talbot, the creation of the new super school Bae Baglan has reinforced negative attitudes about sending their children to school, where Traveller children would make up less than half of one percent of the entire school population.

The community is also very aware that there are plans for merging local primary schools and are already voicing their fears about their children attending the larger primary school.

Fear of exposure to risk factors – Again as the committee will be aware, many traveller families are very protective of their children, they fear that if their children attend secondary school, their children will be exposed to ‘bad

ways' such as sexual promiscuity and therefore teenage pregnancies, drug taking and other anti-social behaviour.

Social Isolation – Our forum undertook a brief engagement programme in August of this year, where myself, Action for Children and Team Around the Family, visited one of the sites for three sessions, and ran one session at the second traveller site. That led to some 20+ referrals for benefits advice, several referrals to adult services and additional requests for child care services. This very brief exercise highlighted how isolated the local GRT community are from Universal Services; this I believe is symptomatic of the wider social isolation of the GRT community which both unpins and compounds the issues already listed above. Therefore we cannot see poor educational attainment in isolation from the wider systemic problems faced by the GRT community. Often the GRT community fall off the radar of universal services, as those services believe the community is hard to reach and won't engage with outside services. However as we have found it is more about taking a proactive approach and actively engaging with the community not only allows better take up of services – it will also exposes areas of unmet need that Universal services would be otherwise blind to.

So What needs to be done?

Following on from the last point, we needed to see poor educational attainment within the context of multiple deprivations which has already been highlighted by the Welsh Government's *Travelling to better Health (2015)*. The more universal services are engaged with the GRT Community the better the dialogue can take place about promoting the Wellbeing of GRT children and young people. It has been argued that this is a hard community to engage with, but our experience has questioned that view, while trust does need to be built-up, most Traveller families are grateful for the support and in turn this opens up a forum for those Wellbeing discussions.

Traveller Education Units

Nearly all the Traveller Education units describe lack of secure funding, several have spoken about not knowing if their services will be funded from year to year. There is a need to look at keeping Traveller Education funding ringfenced and having three or five-year funding strategies, so that those units can develop longer term engagement strategies.

We need to be looking at education from the perspective of the GRT community and currently in Neath Port Talbot there has been a drive to integrate GRT pupils into mainstream Education, while this is commendable in its aspiration, it has led to families becoming more resistant to Secondary Schools resulting in the drop school attendance. Many families would rather no education for their children than integrated education.

For many Traveller Children, the formal classroom structure is a challenge, some of the traveller children find it too restrictive, they will describe how they manage better within the less formal and more supportive environment of the dedicated Traveller Ed units. I am sure that the Travelling Ahead project will be able to provide your committee with good insight into the needs of young Traveller pupils. Sadly, we have lost the small Traveller Education classroom setting in NPT, as the county has preferred integrating Traveller pupils into mainstream classes, which resulted in the drop Secondary school attendance dropping from 8 GRT young people out of 24 attending school in 2014/15, to 4 out of 24 in the 2016/17 school year.

School Performance Indicators

While it is possible to mitigate lower attendance for GRT Children via the 'T code' (i.e. teachers can mark a GRT pupil's nonattendance with a 'T mark' rather than an 'attended' or 'not attended' mark, schools appear to fear that the poor attendance by Traveller children would bring down their overall school attendance rate, therefore, removing a GRT pupil for the school role is a tempting option. Therefore there would be an argument to develop

specific 'P.I' for GRT engagement, this could also apply to other 'hard to reach groups' or communities.

There doesn't appear to be any clear measurement of how many Traveller children are of school age and how many actually attend school. While accurate figures might be difficult to obtain on those Travellers that are still mobile, or those that are living in 'bricks and mortar', it would not be difficult to establish clear figures for those young people whose families have been living permanently on Traveller sites.

Home Education

If Traveller children are not attending school, we need to look at other ways of engaging them in Education, similar to the arguments about using Youth Services, for some families and schools, reporting that their child is Home Educated is a useful opt out. As has recently been highlighted by the Serious Case Review on Dylan Seabridge, families who opt out of mainstream education, can become inviable to universal services, so where families are electing to home educate, we need to have confidence that the child is being educated and supported.

One of the issues identified by one of the two traveller sites in our area has been access to broadband, so that the children are unable to access online learning; broadband cover both through fix line and mobile signal has been problematic for residents on both of our Traveller sites.

There is also need to see Home Education as part of a more proactive engagement process, so while a young Traveller is being Home Educated, they might be provided opportunity to engage in some form of formal education. Once a young person is deemed 'off role' they face further difficulties in engaging in college vocational courses and some consideration needs to be given to improving the flexibility of the learning pathways for 'out of school' young people.

Youth Services

Youth services have a great deal of experience in working with hard to reach youngsters, providing stepping stone links to educational involvement. Part of the problem for the Youth Services is that they have to meet certain funding targets, e.g. run groups for 8 people for 10 sessions, this funding model doesn't always work with the GRT community. Therefore, we would argue that ringfence funding should be made available for Youth Services to do targeted work with the GRT community (as well as other hard to reach communities) which should be based on engagement rather than just numbers of attendees. This way the Youth Workers can provide act as bridge to education and engage in that dialogue with the families about better educational attainment for their children.

Early Years Play Opportunities

While primary school education has better engagement, there is still room to build educational links. Many Traveller children do not attend play groups and nurseries, this means that on starting school they may start behind their non-traveller class mates. As argued above, the provision of onsite early years education can help build better community confidence in outside services, assist in the development of broader parenting knowledge such as healthy diets, the importance of reading simple stories etc.

To Conclude, –it is well documented how the GRT community face multiple issues from poor health, economic deprivation and racial discrimination, therefore we need to have a proactive educational strategy as a vital tool in promoting the Wellbeing Outcomes for GRT children and young people. That proactive educational strategy needs to take a systemic / holistic approach recognising that tackling the wider needs of the GRT community will also positively impact on better educational outcomes for GRT children and young people.

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