

# **Proactive engagement – Multi-agency Travellers Unit in Leicestershire**

## **Background**

Leicestershire County Council has led on the establishment of a multi-agency unit to act as a 'one-stop shop' for all Traveller-related issues, including complaints, access to services, advice and training.

The unit became operational on 9 July 2009 and comprises specialist staff from the county council, city council, NHS and Leicestershire Constabulary. It is responsible for site management of the current local authority sites in the area and is also working closely with all partners towards a long-term solution to the issues facing the local Traveller population and the settled community.

## **Summary**

Traditionally, the role of Gypsy and Traveller liaison officer has been an isolated role, mostly hosted by county councils and generally, expected to be a 'Jack of all trades'. This was the case in Leicestershire with both the county council and Leicester City Council employing two Gypsy and Traveller liaison officers, as well as site managers, and the district authorities tagging the responsibility onto other roles (often environmental health officers). The responsibilities for issues were passed from one person to the next without any consistency of service for both the Gypsy and Traveller population or other members of the public. By drawing up an agency agreement between all the local authorities and other services, such as the police, Travelling Families Health Service, Housing-related Support and the Traveller Education Service we have been able to coordinate a consistent approach to delivering services across the whole of the county, including Leicester city.

Pooling staff has enabled individuals to specialise particular areas of work such as site management, planning, enforcement and community engagement improving the level of service given and saving money.

## **Who is involved?**

All of these projects have a lead officer from the service that is most relevant to their area of work:

Health Ambassadors project – The project was set up using a £20,000 grant from the Pacesetters scheme within the NHS and the lead officer is the specialist nurse for Travellers.

GATE – The project was set up with a £19,000 grant from the Dept for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and a £3,000 grant from Leicestershire Constabulary to tackle hate crime. The lead officer is the Travellers sites and liaison officer at the Multi-agency Travellers Unit (MATU).

UNIQUE – The project was set up with a £10,000 grant from Innovation Challenge to encourage user participation and social enterprise, and for community members to become mentors for service users.

The lead officer is the housing-related support worker from STAR at Leicester City Council.

Aston First Consultation Group – The project is funded from the sites own operational budget and small Leicestershire County Council grants and lead officer is the site manager.

All of these projects have their own sets of volunteers from the Gypsy and Traveller community some people are involved in more than one project.

The MATU manager has an overview of all the different projects and is able to direct enquiries to the most relevant service.

## **The challenges for us**

The unit liaises with local travellers to tackle some of the more deep-rooted social problems. This is something unique to the Leicestershire team as other areas often focus on an enforcement model, which

just moves the problem from one place to another, or a support model which fails to tackle the very public issues surrounding unauthorised encampments.

The specialist team is only one aspect of the work that MATU carry out. The unit carry out effective engagement with the Gypsy and Traveller communities, as well as providing training for other services, and raising awareness with the wider public on Gypsy and Traveller lifestyle.

One project started by the Travelling Families Health Service is that of Health Ambassadors, where a number of volunteers from the Gypsy and Traveller communities provided training to healthcare professionals about Gypsy and Traveller life, and the barriers to accessing healthcare. Training delivered by members of the community and not through Gypsy Liaison Officers has proved beneficial and productive.

Based on this success, further projects have been set up by MATU:

#### [Gypsy and Traveller Equality Project \(GATE\)](#) (PDF, 10 pages, 554KB)

The project aims to explore the key issues within Leicestershire relating to Gypsies and Travellers, to train Gypsy and Traveller volunteers so they are confident in speaking to community groups, and host events raising awareness of the issues to the wider public. The volunteers also raise the profile of the Hate Incident Monitoring Project to the Gypsy and Traveller population thereby increasing reporting and hopefully reducing hate incidents and crimes

Work has also taken place in some schools where GATE members have been involved in delivering a cultural awareness session with children, which is important in feeder schools that do not regularly have Gypsy and Traveller children.

We have been successful in training the Gypsy and Traveller community to give presentations and empowering them to get actively involved in promoting their culture. The community representatives act as a floating resource and are often invited to attend meetings of community forums and other specific events. They can also be used for training sessions for members in all tiers of local government.

#### **Aston Firs Consultation Group**

The Aston Firs Consultation Group organise activities for the Gypsy and Traveller Community to engage with partners and the wider community. The aims are

- To address community cohesion in relation to the integration and engagement of Gypsies and Travellers within the local community.
- To address perceived discrimination in service delivery.
- To improve the quality of life and opportunities for the Gypsy and Traveller community
- To promote Gypsy and Traveller culture.

Although the aims and objectives are similar to that of GATE project, the purpose of this group is to work on a local level on specific issues instead of looking at general issues.

The project involves more than 100 members of the Gypsy and Traveller Community that live on and adjacent to the Aston Firs caravan site, approximately 33 Statutory and voluntary organisations and some local members of the general public.

Prior to the project, residents were feeling out of touch and neglected by the local authority and other services. By meeting with residents, organisations were able to understand the barriers Gypsies and Travellers were encountering in accessing services. More than a hundred families were living on a site that had been forgotten about when services had been designed, such as bus links, road improvements, child

care, library services, home care and so forth. Residents have been informed about the services that are available to them and measures have also been put in place to help them access services.

There was also a need for improvements to the site and surrounding area. Through the Consultation Group, improved footpaths and lighting have been introduced to the area. The county council site is currently undergoing £1.6 million refurbishment and since the commencement of this project, there has been less incidents of fly-tipping and littering, as residents are taking action themselves to keep the area they live in clean and tidy.

## **Outcomes**

The proactive engagement and consultations with the Gypsy and Traveller communities has resulted in some tangible outcomes, including Gypsy and Traveller communities attending community events and helping to bust myths commonly held by local residents. The projects have led to improved cohesion and better relationships between Gypsy residents and other local people.

## **What we learnt**

We wanted to use our approach to address some of the more difficult issues, such as the perception of rubbish on roadside encampments or unauthorised developments. In some of the early sessions, things did not go as well as planned, as arguments arose between different members of the community. One of the factors was that not enough training had been provided to the Gypsy and Traveller representatives that were involved in the project. We have now provided comprehensive training on giving presentations, listening to others when debates are taking place, training on managing difficult discussions using role plays. The training and thorough practice has led to the volunteers of the GATE project to confidently attend meetings without officer support.

Public opposition to provision of new sites for Gypsies and Travellers has also been a huge issue in Leicester and Leicestershire. We have been able to take representatives from GATE along to public meetings to answer questions about Gypsies and Travellers and to also meetings with members and officers about how sites are provided.

In the past, there has been a lack of consultation with Gypsies and Travellers in policy making and service delivery. By encouraging community representatives to attend meetings relating to service delivery, we have been able to make difficult decisions about the cuts to service. We have been able to retain the parts of the service that are the most needed or have altered the method of delivery in a way that fits the modern Gypsy and Traveller lifestyle.

The project has operated for three years for £10,000 (not including officer time). The main costs have been linked to displays, promotional material and expenses. It is intended that the project will become a social enterprise in the future.

## **Contact**

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