

Southwark Travellers Action Group (STAG) second submission regarding an Engagement Framework for Travellers

Main Recommendation- named workers in public services who are understanding of Travellers. Travellers to form relationships with these individuals and be given direct lines so that they can talk to somebody they know.

As with all public services, the degree to which Travellers access and benefit from health care services will largely depend on individual experiences. There was a very mixed response to questions about Travellers attitudes towards health care services which can generally put down to the fact that some receptionists/G.P.s/midwives are more understanding of Travellers than others. When asked, Travellers who spoke positively about their GPs were far more likely to be accessing other healthcare service, and far less likely to use A&E for non-emergencies. Those who had bad experiences with their primary healthcare providers were less likely to use other services and more likely admit to going straight to A&E or ignoring problems. The importance of positive individual relationships should be stressed.

Just as some schools managed to retain Traveller pupils and deliver good results for Traveller pupils while others struggle to maintain sustained attainment; some Travellers are receiving what they regard as good health care and others feel let down. The Traveller community, due to historical marginalisation and discrimination by statutory services and the commonly-held prejudices against Travellers, has reservations about engaging with any statutory body. When individual experiences are poor, this will inform Travellers' attitudes towards larger institutions (one bad experience with a receptionist can inform the opinion that 'the NHS doesn't treat Travellers well'). Travellers often only ever see healthcare professionals (and for that matter social service workers, education welfare officers etc.) at times of crisis- often the worst time for relationships to be formed.

One answer to this problem is to have named individuals in all statutory services who have a specific remit to work with Travellers. These individuals would obviously require the skills and understanding needed to work with Travellers. There are examples of success in this area- Paul Jeffery- the Traveller Housing Officer is well known and trusted resulting in better housing provision for Travellers in Southwark. Paul Jeffery recently introduced Traveller site residents to the new contractors for repair works in order to build good relationships. STAG meets with the police liaison officer for Traveller sites which has resulted in better relations between the police and Travellers. Dave Cannon of Southwark Traveller Education Support Service was known by all Travellers through working with the community for 30 years, and all issues around education were brought to him. STAG employed a health worker in the past who was referred to for all health problems. The health worker was at STAG for 3 years- by the time she left all Travellers in the borough were registered with G.P.s and better informed of other health services available. She ensured that all children received all necessary injections and supported older members of the community by accompanying them to appointments with G.P.s for the first time. Finding named, trusted professionals can happen naturally; many Travellers who use the One-Stop-

Shop will specifically ask for one individual who is knowledgeable on Traveller housing issues without having an official Traveller 'role'.

This wouldn't have to have a major cost implication, entire new positions would not have to be created. However, it would be beneficial to have a named worker at PALS who Travellers had met with Travellers and could form good working-relationships with the community. This arrangement would also be welcomed for education and social services- at the moment Travellers would be unsure of who to turn to. This would be useful in ensuring that myths about statutory services do not proliferate, and enable a better understanding of Travellers from professionals. In short, relationships need to be built. Named individuals is preferred to training for all workers on Traveller issues as Travellers like to deal with people they have already formed relationships with.

STAG will be holding regular service user meetings restarting on 4th February which could provide a forum for professionals to meet with Travellers. However, it cannot be taken for granted that STAG will be operating beyond 2013 as we are reliant on 1 core funder at the moment, the Irish Government, which this year has reduced its emigrant support fund. STAG is developing its governance at the moment in order to provide a better platform for the community to engage with other organisations. STAG can play a big role in improving access to services but at the moment it has no security.

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