

# Caring for Diversity

*Report on a research project to identify  
the need and potential for  
culturally appropriate child welfare  
and protection services for Travellers*



### Background

This report was commissioned in 2002 and following completion in 2003 the findings were presented at roundtable discussions with service providers in the area on how best to use the findings to inform appropriate recommendations. It has been agreed that we publish this summary of the findings to facilitate further and more widespread discussion and consideration of the issues highlighted in the report.

The research was funded by the Traveller Health Unit and was carried out by Máirín Kenny, PHD, Research Consultant and Eileen Mc Neela NBA.

The research project was commissioned by Traveller Families Care and the Shared Rearing Service. The former is a voluntary organisation funded by the South Western Area Health Board under Section 10 of the Child Care Act 1991 and provides Residential and Family Support Services for Traveller families and their children from the Eastern Region (formerly Eastern Health Board area). The latter is a South Western Area Health Board Service, which recruits, trains and supports foster families from the Traveller Community for Traveller children from throughout the country who need alternative family care when they cannot remain in their families of origin.

Both of these services work in close co-operation and are currently being reviewed by the South Western Area Health Board in collaboration with Traveller Families Care. This review is due to be completed in early to mid 2005.

### The Research Project

The aim of the project was “to identify the need and the potential for ethnically sensitive child welfare and protection services for Travellers”.

The methodology used was a study of policy texts and a small-scale qualitative research project, involving interviews with 9 social workers from one community care area in the Eastern Region. While the sample is small and from one community care area the researchers view is that it “offers a ‘window’ onto this issue, through the child welfare and protection social work service in one local community care area”.

The research also includes data on Traveller children in alternative care i.e. foster care and residential care and relates this to population data. Limitations with regard to the comparability of the data are highlighted by the researchers.

## **'Key Needs' are identified as follows:**

- The clear priority is to register Traveller's status as an ethnic group, and of racism against them in all levels of policy, training, information, dissemination and practice.
- Whether supported in the home or placed in alternative care, children at risk need to maintain healthy links with their family/extended family/ethnic group of origin. This requires a service that can connect with Travellers in an informed and culturally appropriate way – a service that knows who Travellers are.
- Innovative provision is required in which Travellers will take up roles in service delivery, a service to which Travellers can relate positively, to report concerns, or to avail of services.

## **Themes emerging from the Research**

- Recognising Travellers as an ethnic group supports a human rights approach to issues relating to Travellers in society or the current official promotion of a discourse of citizenship with diversity, inclusive of all.

The research notes that it can be argued that whether Travellers are called a 'cultural group' or an 'ethnic group' and whether anti-Traveller hostility is called 'discrimination' or 'racism' the experience are the same, however 'ethnicity/racism' terminology has legal status.

The need to respect ethnic identity and specifically Traveller identity in provision for child welfare and protection is endorsed in principle but not adequately addressed at policy level. The innovations and expertise built up in alternative Traveller-targeted provision seem to remain 'ghettoised' within targeted provision. The success of the Shared Rearing Service suggests that cross-fertilisation of mainstream and targeted policy and practice would be fruitful to both sections.

- The research includes data on children in alternative care and relates this to population data. While noting limitations in the data, the report considers overall that the data permits tentative analysis and yield useful insights and points to congruence with other research and concludes that 'it seems that Traveller children are about six times as likely to be taken into alternative care when compared to the total population'.

## Traveller families are over represented in care and in Springboard support projects:

Mc Keown et. al. remarked on the proportion of Travellers involved in Springboard projects:

*... 14% comes from Travelling community ... Traveller families comprise 0.7% of all families with children. In other words, Traveller families are significantly over-represented in Springboard projects – by a factor of 20 – relative to their size in the total population. (Springboard Report, Kieran Mc Keown, DOHC, 2001, pp.15, 16)*

Mc Keown also noted that Traveller families are over represented by a factor of 20 and Traveller children are over represented by a factor of 25. The researcher does suggest that a more accurate comparison could be made by comparing Travellers to other disadvantaged communities rather than the community as a whole, but this is still an alarming and significant difference.

- Travellers comprise less than 1% of the total population but about 6% of children in alternative care in the Eastern Region are Travellers. This is in keeping with McKeown's findings above. This also suggests that the socio-economic and ethnic profile of the population of all children in care demands further investigation.
- The experience and evaluations of the interviewees also suggest a substantial need for investigation into the kind of training and information practitioners need to enable them to deliver culturally appropriate services.
- There is clearly a need also for substantial investment in all facets of child welfare and protection.
- The researchers consider that the findings of this research project reveal key difficulties that block translation of the principle of diversity – sensitive equity into practice.
  1. The basic situation of Traveller identity is not recognised in policy or planning for child welfare and protection services, many Traveller children's health and well being are at severe risk due to their accommodation situation, and believe that until this is addressed it is likely that Traveller children will be over-represented among the population of children receiving welfare and protection services.
  2. The information available on Travellers in the child welfare and protection service does not offer an adequate basis which to evaluate need or plan for change.
  3. As the review of literature reveals, policies and procedures on which the service is based are informed by monocultural thinking and practice: this has a specific impact on Travellers. Social Workers pre-career and in-career training also reflect the orientation and priorities of policy documents.
  4. The level of service provision is inadequate to meet needs, and far below what is required to implement the latest developments in policy thinking; this impacts on all children, Travellers and settled.

# Conclusions and Recommendations from the Research are presented under the following headings:

### 1. Conceptual Framework

- Official and popular concepts of Travellers and of their relation with wider society shape how services are provided for Travellers.
- Adequate resources must be committed to developing a conceptual framework for the overall service that ensures that all policy and practice is informed by respect for diversity and recognition of the power imbalances in Irish society.

### 2. Research and Training

- As revealed in the interviews, discussions, and endorsed in the research literature, training of social workers contains little about culturally appropriate practice and less about Travellers.
- It is of vital importance that adequate resources be committed to developing and delivering in-career and pre-career training to social workers other child welfare professionals and to foster carers in intercultural and anti-racist practice.

### 3. The systemic location and role of targeted services

- The Monitoring Committee 2000 (*First Progress Report of the Committee to monitor and coordinate the Implementation of the recommendations of the Task Force on the Travelling Community, 2000*) states that Travellers have the right to avail of mainstream services without loss of quality and appropriateness in the service. Policy in the mainstream child welfare and protection services is premised on the principle that the services are for all children. Targeted services are informed by recognition of Traveller's ethnic identity and can play a key role in enabling the entire child welfare and protection system to become diversity-sensitive. However there is little evidence in either policy texts, or in the data gathered in this research project, that insights developed in these services have percolated throughout to general provision.
- Traveller targeted services should be seen, not as an additional 'limb', but as part of the central nervous system of the child welfare and protection service.

### 4. Information and Service delivery in Health Board child protection and welfare social work services

- There are information pools within the child welfare and protection system, in the knowledge and expertise that has built up in Traveller specific services and in the research projects undertaken by several social workers in the service. However there are no systems in place to collect and build expertise into an information base, to ensure that this knowledge is getting through to all levels of the service and to enable monitoring and evaluation of the service, in relation to changing needs and possibilities. In particular, there are no systems in place to ensure that collaboration can take place between service providers and the Traveller community. This is necessary in order to develop preventative initiatives in relation to child protection in a broad community development context that would enable vulnerable members to access the strengths within their own community.
- Every community care team should include one specialist social work post with senior practitioner status, with specific responsibility for ensuring that the general service and its support provisions are culturally appropriate and accessible to Travellers.

## 5. Travellers as Service Deliverers

- Observations from interviewers show that Traveller childcare workers and foster carers are positively welcomed by many Traveller clients and can promote ethnic self-respect more effectively than any programmes delivered by settled personnel. Research in relation to alternative care provision for Travellers and for other ethnic minorities, endorses this: central to culturally appropriate practice, is the involvement of minority members in service delivery.
- Adequate resources should be committed to capacity building and identifying substantial roles for Travellers in delivering child welfare and protection services. Models already exist in the Primary Health Care Programme. Some Travellers have also trained as Family Support Workers and Child Care Workers. Traveller Foster Carers are currently caring for Traveller children. It remains a challenge to encourage Travellers to train as Social Workers.

## 6. Targeted Support Services

- The findings of this research project suggest that there is minimal take up of general mainstream support services by Traveller families at risk. The most availed of support (through often ineffectual) was help with finding accommodation. Other accepted supports were Traveller-targeted, offered by Traveller Families Care, the Shared Rearing Service and Exchange House. This finding seems to be at variance with the findings of the Springboard Report (Mc Keown) that Traveller families are over-represented in Springboard projects by a factor of 20. It does suggest the need for a more thorough and disaggregated data collection system.
- Within every Community Care Area, Travellers should have access to culturally appropriate mainstream services and to Traveller-targeted support services.

## 7. Co-ordinated system for data collection and file transfer

One of the key factors inhibiting a delivery of a good quality service to Traveller families in need is the lack of data on Travellers. Data management within the child welfare and protection service is also problematic. Nomadism is a key feature of Traveller culture and needs to be taken into consideration. Existing guidelines lay down procedures for case tracking but the data in this research project highlighted the lack of resources and commitment to contacting and following up families at risk as they move to other Health Boards.

- a. To enable identification of issues and to monitor effectiveness of response, up-to-date data disaggregated on both ethnic and socio-economic bases, are required for each community care area from Health Boards and Local Authorities. SWIS (Social Work Information System) is being introduced to all community care teams. SWIS could be used as a tool to collect such data in Health Boards.
- b. Health Boards should furnish population statistics for their geographical areas, to provide the social context for figures of children in receipt of, or placed in childcare services.
- c. Relevant and appropriate resources should be put in place to ensure that procedures set out in Children First Guidelines for the Welfare and protection of Children and the 1995 Task Force recommendations (Monitoring Committee Report 2000) regarding file transfer procedures are implemented and their use is monitored.