

Case Study 4



Leeds GATE
Gypsy and Traveller
Exchange

Re-imagining Community Involvement

Strengthening a sense of identity

Case study

Leeds Baseline Census of Gypsies and Travellers 2005

Location
Leeds

Summary

Over seven years, Leeds Gypsy and Traveller Exchange (GATE) has become nationally recognised as led by and representative of Gypsy and Irish Traveller people.

From the outset GATE has been a collaboration between Gypsies and Irish Travellers and non Travellers.

This case study describes work done to overcome the lack of quantitative data about our communities and provides one illustration of how we have ensured that the mainstream skills and capacity of non Travellers have not overwhelmed and disempowered the quieter voice of Travelling people.



Roma artist Ferdinand Kochi working at Lee Gap Horse Fair, Leeds 2009.

Background

Leeds GATE Gypsy and Irish Traveller people were not recognised in the 1976 Race Relations Act and until the next national census in 2011 have rarely appeared on monitoring forms. While other ethnic minority groups have benefited from over thirty years of legal recognition and investment, Gypsy and Irish Traveller people remained marginalised. Our culture and traditions have largely been recognised only as far as they are historic and 'exotic'. We find ourselves either romanticised for our traditional practices or vilified as deviant lowlife.

Despite this, Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities have survived and retained an identity within the UK for hundreds of years. Our family-based culture, pride and enterprising spirit have ensured that our young people grow up with deeply held values, a strong sense of identity and an expectation of taking care of themselves and their families. However, just by being a minority within a majority

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This is one of 12 case studies in the Re-imagining Community Involvement series

Download the studies at www.yhep.org.uk. This series is co-ordinated by Yorkshire & the Humber Forum, the voice of the voluntary and community sector.

culture, we have often found ourselves without power and choice.

Whilst we share some characteristics with other communities, our nomadic lifestyle has marked us out as different. As pressure for land and mass communication has grown rapidly during the last 50 years, we are increasingly targeted as a source of fear and perceived threat to majority norms. Whilst all cultures grow and evolve, recent decades have seen us forced to adapt, such as settlement on permanent sites via the 1968 Caravan Sites Act and subsequent legislation, with pitifully little consultation or consideration of the detrimental consequences to our communities.

At last our ethnic identity has been recognised

Second to our nomadic culture, lack of widespread literacy and school attendance is perhaps the biggest difference between ourselves and the settled communities who surround us. Whilst school attendance was first made compulsory in the 1880 Education Act, Gypsy and Irish Traveller children have been turned away from school well into the twentieth century. Indeed, the first acceptance into school of some Leeds-based Travelling children made headlines in the Yorkshire Evening Post in the late 1970's. Most Travelling children now complete primary school but we still find secondary school problematic. We experience blatant racism, unfortunately sometimes even from teachers. We fear the influence of drugs and sex education but more deeply held is our fear of the dilution of our culture which has protected our children and retained our identity.

At last our ethnic identity has been recognised (Race Relations Act (A) 2000) and we will appear as ethnic categories in the 2011 national census, although there is still a long way to go in overcoming the often used label 'hard to reach'.



Leeds Baseline Census of Gypsies and Travellers 2005

In 2002 a small number of Gypsy and Irish Traveller community members from Leeds were attending forum meetings with representatives from education, health, race equality and third sector organisations. The group identified the need for Gypsy and Irish Traveller people to represent their own interests and supported the formation of Leeds Gypsy and Traveller Exchange (Leeds GATE) in 2003.

Although the idea of the new organisation was supported by local Gypsies and Irish Travellers, there was almost universal cynicism about what could be achieved. Particularly on the local authority site, community members were used to being 'consulted' and 'researched' without any tangible outcome except promises of change that did not materialise. However, a couple of early events established some trust and solidarity between the newly employed worker and community members. A small group agreed to act as committee members, chose a name and began to feel that perhaps this was 'their' project.

A major obstacle to being taken seriously and accessing funding that we encountered was an almost total lack of data about our communities. There was some national research carried out by

academics and a couple of local qualitative reports, again carried out by 'outsiders', but no real quantitative data. To address this, Maureen Baker, Chair of the Leeds Race Equality Council suggested that we conduct our own local baseline census.

The Leeds Baseline Census has become a nationally recognised piece of work which is highlighting the circumstances of Gypsy and Irish Traveller people.

When the report was done we put on an event and invited people involved in the census and local service providers to attend. The Director of Public Health was horrified by what he heard, and as a result GATE successfully negotiated a service level agreement to provide health advocacy to Gypsy and Irish Traveller people. The Department of Health also heard about the census and included it in a good practice guide about monitoring. The Leeds Baseline Census has become a nationally recognised piece of work which is highlighting the circumstances of Gypsy and Irish Traveller people. Leeds Gypsies and Irish Travellers who were involved in the census are very proud of the work, and trust in GATE grew as a result.

This is how Eileen Lowther, now the Chair of GATE, describes what we did

Leeds GATE *Nobody had any clear idea how many Gypsies and Travellers were living in Leeds. We couldn't argue for services because we didn't know either. I thought it was important to count up Gypsies and Travellers in Leeds because although we have been here for hundreds of years we're getting forgotten about and left out of everything. Especially Gypsies and Travellers who have gone in houses are getting forgot, it's not recognised who they are. It's a very good thing that we did the census.*

Maureen Baker MBE is a very understanding person who knows what she is doing and she has been through things herself. I've never heard before of anyone who thought doing a census of Gypsies and Travellers is a good idea. Maureen was at lots of meetings and she realised that we were getting left out. She knew who to go on at so that we could do a census and now we know. Maureen drew the form, added up all the numbers and wrote the report to tell people about it.

If the council workers had tried to do it before I would still have thought it was a good idea because our culture is important, but I don't think Gypsy and Traveller people would have trusted why they were doing it. Bad things have happened in the past.

Lots of us aren't good readers but Maureen made it so easy for travelling people themselves to do the census, by using diagrams and 'tick boxes', and so easy for those being asked the questions to see how the answers were recorded. All you had to do was tick boxes to say what type of place people lived or put a number to say how many people were what ages.

There was no names or addresses, which is why so many people agreed to be included in it. Gypsies and Travellers in Leeds trusted it, because we were doing it ourselves. I enjoyed doing the counting. I went looking for Gypsies and Travellers and found people I hadn't realised were there. I felt really a part of what we were doing and that it was important. I think that having GATE at the back of us has really helped in making people listen to us.

When Maureen had written up the report we had a meeting. When I heard what we found out I was very surprised about how many Gypsies and Travellers were in houses that we hadn't known about but I think there is a lot more we didn't find. We had to stop looking after six months so Maureen could get the report done.

We found out that nearly 20% of the settled people in Leeds are over 60 but only 2.33% of Gypsies and Travellers who live in Leeds are over 60. This means that settled people live on average to 78 years old while on average we only live until we are 50. I am 50 years old and I find this very upsetting and frightening.



Lee Gap Horse Fair, the largest local annual gathering of Gypsies, Travellers and settled people together, the oldest charter Horse Fair in England.



This census should be done all over the country where travelling people are. This is the best way to show councils and health people what is happening to us. They need to do something to help us but we can start by doing something to help ourselves. Doing the project this way has made a lot of difference to our community's trust in GATE; that we are really trying to help, not to make ourselves bigger than anyone else.'

Future activities

'We continue to ensure that community members can get involved in all aspects of GATE without first having to overcome barriers such as literacy.'

'Participants of the census went on to act as interviewers for the Yorkshire and Humber, and West Yorkshire Gypsy Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessments. This means that further critical information about the needs of Gypsies and Irish Travellers is credible with the communities because we were involved in the collection of the data.'

'GATE has been a leading member of the lobby to increase data monitoring of Gypsies and Irish Travellers which resulted in these categories being included within the 2011 national census for the first time. The critical work now is to encourage as many community members as possible to self identify during the census and to ensure that census data is gathered at Gypsy and Traveller sites. Due to our work on the Leeds Baseline Census we are well placed as a key stakeholder to the Office of National Statistics. We will participate in work to promote to community members the benefits of self identification and are able to work strategically to influence the gathering of data from sites.'

Conclusions

- 1 Lack of data can be an opportunity to engage and involve people.
- 2 It is said that 'information is power'. If so, the best way to empower people is to ensure they have ownership over information about themselves.
- 3 Following from the above, if the data is gathered by community members, they can take ownership of the information and any outcomes that arise from it. They are less likely to feel like 'guinea pigs' for the curiosity of people from outside the community, whatever their motivation.
- 4 With appropriate thought and consultation, literacy need not be a barrier to involvement in data gathering.
- 5 Community involvement and empowerment is not a quick fix. It is a process which can take years, generations even. Short-term interventions can generate poor practice, such as over-consultation which generates cynicism, and can set progress back significantly.

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Leeds Gypsy Roma Traveller Achievement Service

A really useful resource where you will find a wealth of information including academic studies, historical information and links to other resources: www.grtleeds.co.uk/index.html

Leeds Baseline Census of Gypsies and Travellers 2005

www.grtleeds.co.uk/information/downloads/BaselineCensus.pdf

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