



TRAVELLING TO WELLBEING SEMINAR REPORT

The following is a short report on the 'Travelling to Wellbeing' seminar on mental health and the Traveller community which took place at Offaly Traveller Movement, Tullamore on 20th June 2013.

The speakers made some thought provoking presentations which led to some very lively discussion which was captured as the challenges, opportunities and way forward which appear at the end of this report. There were 75 people in attendance of which over half were members of the Traveller community. The mix of Travellers, Traveller organisations and other service providers on the day led to a highly meaningful and productive engagement.

Organisations in attendance included:

- Galway Traveller Movement
- Westmeath Traveller Project
- Longford Primary Healthcare Programme for Travellers
- Laois Traveller Action Group
- Exchange House Traveller Service
- West Cork Travellers
- Midlands Traveller Conflict and Mediation Initiative
- Traveller Counselling Service
- Save Our Sons and Daughters
- HSE
- Offaly Domestic Violence Support Service
- Offaly County Council
- Anna Liffey Drugs Project
- Jigsaw Offaly
- Offaly Local Development Company
- Arden View Resource Centre
- Roscommon Leader Partnership



From top: Group discussion, Sandra McDonagh, Brigid Mongan Kinsella



The keynote speaker, Thomas McCann is a member of the Irish Traveller community and a long time Traveller activist. He is a founder member of the Irish Traveller Movement where he was also employed as the Equality worker and as a Director among many other roles. He was instrumental in campaigning for the Equal Status Act and the Traveller Accommodation Act. Thomas holds a Diploma in Community Development from NUI Maynooth. Now working in the field of psychotherapy, Thomas is a counsellor and holds a BSc in Psychotherapy and a Masters in Counselling Supervision. Thomas is currently a council member of Minceirs Whidden, a Traveller only organisation and is also a member of the National Traveller Monitoring Advisory Committee. Thomas established and currently manages the National Traveller Counselling Service which was launched in 2008.

Thomas helped to set the context through his presentation 'Mental Health and the Traveller Community: the visible and the invisible'. He discussed the very high suicide rates within the Traveller community, the high numbers of Travellers on anti-depressants and also in psychiatric units and the huge stigma and shame which still exists around issues of mental health within the community. He found that Travellers do not tend to engage with mental health services until they have gone into crisis. Thomas explained how experiences of social exclusion, discrimination, racism and negative stereotypes of the Traveller community over many generations had led to the current situation. As well as these visible signs, he discussed the invisible: the way such experience is internalised and leads to feelings of shame and worthlessness both individually and as a community as a whole. This process naturally leads to low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, anger and aggression, substance misuse and self-harm and suicide behaviour. This presentation led to a passionate debate and the recommendations listed further on in this report.

The next speaker was Brigid Mongan Kinsella, who is a member of the Offaly Traveller community, lives in Banagher and is a full time parent bringing up her 3 year old son Martin. Brigid kindly agreed to share her personal experience of living in recovery from depression. Brigid described the challenges of her experience of depression in her late teens and early twenties and then described how she had been able to embark upon a journey of recovery. Brigid's story was incredibly inspiring and her positivity and humility impressed all who attended.

The third speaker was Larry Scully who is the Offaly Traveller Movement Men's community development health worker. Larry re-entered full time education after 33 years working in Dublin docks and graduated with a degree in youth and community work from NUI Maynooth in 2012. Larry is now a valued member of the OTM team and has developed the work with Traveller men in Offaly considerably. Larry spoke about strategies for engaging men in health activity, and challenged the common wisdom that men (in particular Traveller men) are resistant and difficult to engage in health programmes. Larry argued that successful engagement was dependent upon finding the right ways to engage, how such work is designed and how it is then implemented. The Offaly Men's horse project was used as an example of a culturally appropriate, informal education approach which had resulted in significant impact upon the health behaviour of the participants. The Midlands Traveller Men's Health Network was also used as an example of how men could be supported to build capacity in leadership and decision making in order to represent their community on health decision making structures, improving 'buy in' from Traveller men.



Studies show suicide rates among the Traveller community are six times higher than in the settled population, accounting for at least 11% of all deaths.



The final speaker, Sandra McDonagh has been a foster carer, youth leader and community care assistant before returning to education and completing a Masters in social work at Trinity College in 2012. Sandra is now a Mental Health social worker who is based at the Offaly Traveller Movement and is delivering the new Travelling to Wellbeing Programme which she launched at this seminar.

A new partnership initiative between Offaly Traveller Movement, Exchange House Dublin, West Cork Travellers Development Project and Travellers of North Cork; the programme aims to reduce the stigma around mental health and suicide in the Traveller community, supports individualised recovery plans/programmes with Travellers experiencing mental health issues, develops culturally appropriate recovery models using a community development approach and aims to address inequalities by working with Travellers and service providers to deepen understanding, improve referral pathways and aid recovery. The aims of the programme are that Travellers will get the support they need to aid their recovery from mental health issues, become more informed, confident and supported in their recovery and in using other services, and that service providers be better informed and confident in responding to the needs of Travellers and that stronger and more responsive pathways will be forged with services.

Finally, Anthony O'Prey who is the Health Promotion Officer at the Offaly Local Development Company facilitated a group discussion as a way of capturing the responses and ideas arising from the seminar: 'Suicide is killing our Children': A facilitated workshop, identifying the challenges, opportunities and exploring a common way forward.



Facilitated workshop

Challenges, opportunities and the way forward

Participants were divided into four sub-groups, two sub-groups were invited to discuss and summarize what they believed to be the 'challenges'. The remaining two sub-groups were invited to discuss and summarise what they believed to be the 'opportunities'. Each sub-group was facilitated by a member of the Speaker Panel: Thomas McCann, National Traveller Counselling Service, Brigid Mongan Kinsella, member of the Offaly Traveller Community, Larry Scully, OTM Men's Health Worker and Sandra McDonagh, OTM Mental Health Social Worker. Participants were then invited to feedback their top 5 key findings which emerged out of their discussions and then invited to participate in an open-floor discussion about a common way forward. The following highlights points raised from this process:

CHALLENGES:

- An overwhelming experience of social exclusion, discrimination, racism and negative stereotypes of the Traveller community
- The very high suicide rates within the Traveller community, the high numbers of Travellers on anti-depressants and also in psychiatric units and the huge stigma and shame which still exists around issues of mental health within the community.
- The language/wording of 'Mental Health'. This was felt to be stopping Travellers engaging in services, and fed into a central topic of the stigma existing within the Traveller community.
- School: many young people are not completing 2nd Level education, diminishing life chances and instilling a sense of hopelessness.
- A need to acknowledge culturally appropriate milestones for Travellers: school leaving, marriage and family planning often start much earlier than in the settled community. This is important when designing and delivering mental health initiatives.
- Fear of judgement from within the community: this is a source of stress and a cause of mental ill-health. Travellers are afraid to say what's going on in their head; it's difficult to say/talk about what is going on.

OPPORTUNITIES:

- Events like this seminar which bring the Traveller community, Traveller organisations and other service providers together. Listening to each other.
- There are currently many organisations delivering help and advice around mental health. There are many networking opportunities in which Traveller organisations can play a key role.
- Cultural awareness programmes: should be part of education system, i.e. pictures of Traveller culture on the walls alongside other pictures of ethnic groups. Pre-schools could be Traveller friendly also.
- Ethnicity – Travellers want their own identity. The recognition of Traveller ethnicity would strengthen group identity internally and within wider society, a good starting place to build upon community confidence.



Thomas McCann

On a local level Offaly Traveller Movement felt energised to make some commitments at the end of the seminar:

To establish a mental health working group to further explore the issues arising from this seminar.

To develop an integrated mental health strategy to include the Travelling to Wellbeing programme, Men's health programme, Primary Healthcare programme for Travellers and Youth Programme.

To engage in further specialist mental health training in order to build capacity as an organisation.

To explore ways in which to develop partnership working between Offaly Traveller Movement, the Traveller community and local mental health service providers.



THE WAY FORWARD

- First point of contact on what to do if concerned about Mental Health needs to be more obvious / visible and well 'sign posted'.
- GP's need to have a better understanding of Traveller culture.
- Establish who is accountable – Travellers should be supported to stand up and ask who is accountable if not receiving the same treatment / rights to services.
- 'Collective' is the key – strong national voice for Travellers needed.
- Working Groups – establish needs of local communities.
- We need to have a clear understanding of the effects that racism, discrimination and social exclusion has had on the Traveller community.
- Need to put supports in place to help individuals and the wider Traveller community to work through these difficulties.
- Counselling, group work, discussion groups, personal development courses need to be designed and implemented.
- It was suggested that there is a need to better understand Traveller culture and historical discourse between the Traveller community and the settled community.
- It is essential that Travellers are supported to talk about their experiences and how this makes them feel.
- Service providers need to develop cultural competency when working with the Traveller community.

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