



Diversity on the Agenda Case Study

Mobile Library Travellers Project

The Challenge:

To encourage children and adults from the gypsy and traveller community to use the library service

The Participants:

Project worker
Essex Library Staff
Essex County Council
Essex Travellers Education Service (ETES)
Essex Primary Schools
Gypsy Council
Traveller Site Managers
Gypsies and travellers

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The Response:

Evaluating

During 2000, Essex County Council evaluated their ethnic monitoring and other surveys and identified that the gypsy and traveller communities were not using their library service. Discussions followed to find a suitable way of providing a library service and identify potential partners to work with.

Tailoring an existing service

A partnership began with Essex Travellers Education Service to see if the mobile library service that they use to reach housing estates, villages and remote hamlets, could be tailored to suit the travelling community. The Essex Travellers Education Service took advice from the Gypsy Council and began discussions with the site managers of council owned sites during the end of 2000, to find a way of gaining their trust and introducing the service without intimidating the community. Before long, the Education Service were knocking at the community's doors, consulting with the travellers and letting them know what to expect. A project worker was funded by the Children's Fund to help carry out the work and the Mobile Library Travellers Project was set up in 2001.

Breaking down barriers

The next stage was to train the librarians in cultural awareness, to reduce the fears they had about the travelling community, and teach them about travellers' life and faith.

Many of the staff felt that they may not be welcomed on the site. Essex Travellers Education Service and the site managers provided support until the staff felt comfortable in their new environment.

The material in the mobile library was expanded to include books that reflected the traveller lifestyle. Books on animals and how to look after them appealed to the children, while the adults were offered traveller heritage and reminiscence books that were highly pictorial to encourage them to join in. Although some were not able to read, they enjoyed flicking through the pages and talking about the pictures. Some linked it in with their own experiences of travelling, even finding photos of their relatives in some of the books.

Monitoring the response

The mobile libraries began visiting five traveller sites during the autumn of 2001. Since then eight mobile libraries have been visited by more than 150 children and their parents. Eight Essex Primary Schools with a high register of traveller children have also reported increases in school attendance since the libraries started visiting the schools. Primary school teachers have also noticed the parents are being encouraged to be taught how to read by their children. Surprisingly, it was not only the mothers who were coming along to mobile library, but fathers and grandfathers are taking an interest in their children's reading too.

The word has been spreading about these mobile libraries to other sites. Some travellers have approached the staff and have asked for a library to visit their site. The project has received extra money from the Children's Fund to continue the project and increase the number of traveller sites they visit from five to seven and to include sites that are privately run. They are also looking in to other services that could be provided, of benefit to the traveller community.

Diversity Learning Lessons:

- Review your services regularly to identify the people you could be excluding.
- Identify the people and organisations that can provide guidance and support.
- Identify best practice examples from similar services.
- Inform and consult with the community involved.
- Provide staff training on cultural background.
- Provide on-site support for staff and community until they feel comfortable.
- Provide service material that is relevant to the community.
- Monitor the outcomes from all available sources.
- Identify other services that may be of benefit to the community.