

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

SELECT COMMITTEE - STUDENT JOURNEY

MINUTES of a meeting of the Select Committee - Student Journey held in the Darent Room, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Thursday, 16 June 2011.

PRESENT: Mr K Smith (Chairman), Mr M C Dance (Vice-Chairman), Mr A R Chell, Mr P J Homewood, Mr R J Lees, Mr S C Manion and Mr M J Northey

IN ATTENDANCE: Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer) and Mr G Romagnuolo (Policy Overview Research Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

11. Interview with Louise Simpson, Acting Manager, Minority Communities Achievement Service, Kent County Council *(Item 1)*

Please provide a summary of the roles and responsibilities that your post involves.

The Minority Communities Achievement Service (MCAS) supports access and attainment issues for all minority groups, but focuses on those who are vulnerable for whatever reason. Nationally, there are special education services for Gypsies and Travellers, as they are the group which has most problems accessing education, and the issues they experience are broader than those experienced by other ethnic minorities.

MCAS provides advisors, works with schools and teachers on curriculum development and initiatives to raise attainment, and provides Family Liaison Officers (FLOs) whose role is to act as a link between home and school, particularly where that relationship is poor. MCAS also responds to requests from schools for support.

What we don't do is have a clear picture of who exactly is included in the population we are working with. There used to be a clear caseload of families upon which we could focus our support, but now we have to rely on anecdotal information and on people identifying themselves as Gypsies or Travellers, which many simply don't do. Many do not declare themselves to be Gypsies or Travellers as they fear their children will be disadvantaged if they are identified as such. We support them to deal with racial incidents, but we can never reach a full understanding of the issues they face if they do not declare themselves. Some families believe that Gypsies and Travellers are treated less favourably than even other minority ethnic groups, so ethnic declaration for them is still a contentious issue.

FLOs work with supporting cultural issues. Gypsy and Traveller children tend to group together and are very protective of their siblings, which is expected in their culture, but this can be perceived by schools as 'ganging up'. FLOs need to help families to understand general expectations around school systems and support them when racism needs to be dealt with.

Some schools have developed very good practice and identify Gypsy and Traveller issues successfully by addressing cultural issues head on. We support a school with their curriculum and strategy and build their confidence. Where we have worked with schools in this way, there is much improvement in behaviour and relationships. One man went through his own school career not declaring his Gypsy and Traveller heritage. As an adult, he got a job at the school and decided to reveal his background so he could be a mentor for Gypsy and Traveller children. This has made a big change to the school's relationship with Gypsy and Traveller families. To improve our engagement with Gypsy and Traveller families, we need to identify their real experiences.

Access to schools is still a challenge for those Gypsies and Travellers who move around, although Kent has a very low mobile Gypsy and Traveller population, with most families being on KCC or District Council-run or privately-run permanent sites, or settled in housing. The current schools admissions scheme presents a big challenge to those families as it replaces a system whereby families could approach a school independently, but they do still manage to get their children into schools, often with the support of the service.

A challenge for schools is that, officially, they can only report on those children who declare their ethnicity, even though they may have good local knowledge. The official data from Management Information shows that there is still much under-declaration. It is frustrating for schools who have young people who are doing well when the national picture is poor in terms of attainment. They work well with the young people they have but it is difficult to show these results as Gypsy and Traveller children do not appear in data sets. There needs to be more conversation with families about why schools need to know about them, as they are still very nervous of being disadvantaged once their Gypsy and Traveller status is known. There has been some improvement in this in the last 5 years but generally the picture is very slow to change.

We find that there are fewer declarations of a child's Gypsy and Traveller status once they enter Secondary School. Although data relating to a pupil will transfer with them from Primary to Secondary School, they can withhold or actively change their Gypsy and Traveller status, and many do. Any family can alter the recorded information on their ethnicity during their child's schooling.

Settled Gypsy and Traveller communities have fewer issues about accessing school, but often still miss out on Early Years provision and hence might miss out on getting their child into the Reception year at the local school. Parents could previously go straight to a local infant school and put their child's name down for a place but they now have to apply to the Local Education Authority months in advance. They fear going to another school with which they are not familiar, so some choose to home school their child instead.

Do they tend to access Children's Centres?

Not very well, as they tend to be anxious of unfamiliar situations, and also the offer might not necessarily suit them. Children's Centres seek to identify the local 'hidden communities' who do not engage with them, and we work with them on this.

Can Gypsy and Traveller parents find information about admissions, etc, at their local school?

They would have to be literate to find and use this information, and many of them aren't. They might fill in a form to apply for a school place but then, if they are mobile, they might have moved on by the time places are being allocated, so they miss joining the system. If they are a settled family, communication is often then sent out to them, but handling and responding to this can be a barrier

There are some examples of good practice in the county, like the Head Teacher of Sittingbourne Community College, and Parkside Community Primary School in Canterbury, which both work with Gypsies and Travellers and foster good relationships between their schools, Gypsy and Traveller families and Social Services. We need inspired Head Teachers like this to move the agenda forward.

Yes, I agree. When we talk about someone having a different culture, it is not to use it as an excuse for behaviour but to help identify any extra needs that they might have. Some schools are more flexible in the way they deal with Gypsies and Travellers. Gypsy and Traveller culture values face-to-face communication and honesty.

I can see that Gypsies and Travellers have a problem about declaring their heritage, but once they do, things can get better for them as they find they are eligible for free school meals and other assistance.

I don't think they would necessarily welcome this extra help. The majority of Gypsy and Traveller families do not apply for free school meals or other 'hand-outs' as it is not the done thing to accept charity.

They are proud people who like to provide for their families. There are of course families that do take advantage of support.

Unfortunately, the system and its funding are geared to identifying people in this way.

Schools get extra funding per pupil if they can declare that they have Gypsy and Traveller children on their roll, and if they declare English as a second language also there is additional money. Many children speak Anglo-Romany and, because they are exposed to another language at home, they are, by definition, bi-lingual. Gypsies and Travellers do not always see themselves as bi-lingual, but the learning mechanism is geared to identifying this and offering additional support.

Why are Gypsy and Traveller families reluctant to visit Children's Centres?

It's a cultural issue; in their culture, young children should be at home with their mothers. Many young parents have parents who have not gone through the school system, so they don't necessarily see the full value of Early Years as preparation for later school life. They see it just as play, and small children can play at home with their mothers. They are also fearful of letting young children go to a school environment.

Do they want their children to learn to read and write?

Yes, very few parents do not want their children to receive some level of schooling, even if they did not have any themselves, but they are likely to remove their child from education if there is any problem or breakdown in their relationship with a school as the happiness of their children comes first.

How do they stand with the law if they do not send their child to school?

If a child never attends, and is hence never included on any school roll, there is no problem and no legal chase-up. There are concerns nationally, though, about children who are in this situation, as there is a potential safeguarding risk. However, if a child starts school and their name gets into the system, if they subsequently stop attending, there will be an investigation to find out why they are missing from school and pressure to get them to return.

How long does a Gypsy and Traveller child stay at one school, and how can they stay if the family moves around?

Of the mobile Gypsy and Traveller population in Mid Kent, there are only five mobile children this year, as the majority of the Kent population is settled. Dispensations can be made for a child's temporary absences from school if a family can show that they need to move around to find work, but very few families take up this option.

Do Gypsy and Traveller families retain their own ethnic identity once they become settled?

Families settle for different reasons. For some, it is the best option for them if legislation changes and closes temporary stopping places, making a mobile life less feasible, while others choose to settle to access education for their children. We offer much support for families who are settling for the first time, as this is a big adjustment for them. Some families do not use all the rooms in a house as they are simply not used to having so many different rooms or so much space. Some do not use the upstairs and sleep instead in a caravan in the drive, as they cannot get used to going upstairs to sleep!

Do they stay in one place long enough for their children to go through school?

Yes.

How well do they assimilate? Can they assimilate in the wrong way?

Some families worry that they will lose their culture once they settle. Often they are geographically and socially isolated. Some socialise with other Gypsies and Travellers and some do not. Most families who withdraw their child from school due to unresolved racial incidents are also fearful of what their children might be exposed to. Things such as various mixed-gender school activities and the way in which sex education is taught will challenge their strict moral codes and rules about male/female roles and relationships. Some will withdraw a young daughter from school as they are not happy with her having to relate to male teachers. They might fear drug use at school, and will withdraw their child as soon as this fear arises.

What trades do they take on, traditionally?

The work ethic is very strong; sometimes what you actually do is less important. However, they find that they need paper qualifications even for the most basic jobs, and for trades that they have traditionally followed.

If a Gypsy and Traveller child moves from school to school, does this cause a pressure in the system, as mid-year entry would mean the child not being counted for funding, as they would have been if they had joined the September intake?

Yes, this does cause some tension.

The Attainment at Key Stage 2 Select Committee will be looking at issues relating to Gypsy and Traveller children, and we can tie in with the Gypsy and Traveller Advisory Board.

Do some schools simply get it wrong and fail to take any account of any Gypsy and Traveller culture or needs?

Yes, some do not appreciate or take account of any cultural points relating to Gypsy and Traveller children.

How do young Gypsies and Travellers move on from school? Do they ever attend university, or take a gap year to go travelling, etc? Does the way in which we provide university education present a cultural barrier for them?

Some Higher Education is an issue for them. There was one young Gypsy and Traveller man who was able to go to university but didn't as he didn't feel that he had sufficient support. Extended pastoral support by a school, to continue supporting a young person once they leave, would have helped him. Young people's destinations beyond school are an issue, and they are easily lost to the system. Other children are lost to the education system through home schooling. Once they are outside the system, we have no monitoring mechanism for them, except for a few young people who link up with Connexions.

Do some who choose to drop out of school ever re-enter?

It is difficult to tell. Those who are home schooled are not picked up later by the Connexions database.

And where do they go when they get to 22?

Most are in employment, many of them with their families. They will always find work somewhere, as their work ethic is very strong. More families now want Higher Education for their children. Although many Gypsies and Travellers still work in traditional trades, they are learning and taking advantage of new mechanisms to help them do business, eg using a laptop to email a quote quickly and beat a competitor to secure a customer.

You said that many Gypsy and Traveller parents are illiterate. How do they manage to home school their children?

You don't need to demonstrate literacy to take on home education, and the LEA has no duty to check up on the quality of home schooling, unless there is a safeguarding concern about the child. A parent can choose to liaise with the LEA about the quality of home schooling, but there will be no follow-up if they do not choose to liaise.

Many young Gypsy and Traveller people have found that courses are inflexible, and literacy has been an issue. Once they are outside school, it is far more difficult to access literacy support. Often they are unable to complete courses, even when they have excelled on the practical side.

How can the Select Committee help to address the issues you have described?

There needs to be more support alongside traditional Further/Higher Education courses. Young people's abilities and needs should be identified at the start, so a course can be made as flexible as possible and a young person will not waste time and energy working on something and then find they cannot complete it satisfactorily. We liaise with other teams but there is not any local support available to help a young person with specific literacy needs alongside a college course.

What can the KCC do to help young Gypsies and Travellers to find employment?

Support has to start at school, and decisions are left for young people to take on their own. If their school and their family do not have a good relationship, a young person will miss out on support and will be more likely to drop out. Better communication is needed, and young people need to be encouraged to raise their expectations.

Literacy seems to be used as a barrier to exclude them. We tend to impose our values around literacy, but if it does not matter so much to them, they can pursue very good practical courses for which literacy is not so important.

If literacy were less of a barrier, or if there were more support available, young Gypsies and Travellers would do so much better in education.

Technology can offer options to help overcome the literacy barrier. There is equipment on which a document can be scanned and read back to the user. We should be proactive and use technology in a positive way to address problems.

12. Interview with Andy Birkin, Interim Head of the Youth Offending Service, Kent County Council
(Item 2)

Please provide an outline of the roles and responsibilities that your post involves, and an overview of the services supplied by the Youth Offending Team.

From 1982 to 1999 I worked as a Probation Officer in Kent, then as a manager at Medway Youth Offending Service (YOS), until I joined the Kent YOS in 2004. I took up my current post in October 2010.

I have an overview of the relationship between YOS and Education and how they relate to each other and work together. We share the aim of keeping as many young people as possible in mainstream school for as long as possible. There are some behavioural issues that need to be dealt with, but schools are generally fairly creative about how they approach these. There are forums such as the 'Managed Move' schemes in Ashford and Shepway which aim to promote and support inclusion.

There are five education workers, at least one in each YOS team, whose primary role is to liaise with schools to keep young people in school as long as possible, and if that fails, to liaise with alternative education providers. Providers of the alternative curriculum are very receptive and understanding of young people's needs. They work with young people who often have very challenging circumstances, but they engage well and achieve reasonable outcomes.

There is increased use of reduced timetables, in which a young person attends school for maybe as few as five hours a week. Some of this is out-of-hours work. A young person might be put on reduced hours and a reduced curriculum for three weeks or so before being supported into re-integration. Year 11 is a real challenge for many young people who are not academic and have no interest in exams. Many pupils in their final year get out of the habit of attending school. For them, some schools will agree to a reduced timetable or education at home. This decision would

be made as part of the school's pastoral support plan. 67 – 75% of young people of statutory school age do a full 25 hour week programme of education.

Problems often arise when a young person leaves school. If they have problems with learning or engaging, these problems will emerge at that time, but the picture that we work with is a fragmented one. YOS provision includes two integrated resettlement officers, who work with convicted young people who have served a custodial sentence (although, in Kent, there are very few young people in this category). These officers support young people upon their release with issues such as finding accommodation, accessing education and doing some basic skills training. The 'New Skills, New Lives' Project, which has government funding, is used by the KCC to support 20 young people in a vulnerable learners scheme. These initiatives have had successes, and employers have found that the literacy and numeracy levels of the young people involved have been higher than they expected. Literacy and numeracy projects can be accessed on line, and these work well with young people who found it difficult to engage with these subjects at school.

Provision of suitable courses by Further Education colleges can be patchy, particularly in Ashford, Swale and Shepway, and much of the provision does not meet young people's needs. Courses are offered, but they are not underpinned by pastoral support, and many young people drop out because they do not feel supported.

There is an apprentice scheme which aims to match young people's interests, needs and abilities to suitable employment options. NOLAS funding is used to help provide training in construction, in partnership with JobCentre Plus. This training is provided by construction workers, who have a good success rate at getting through to young people and who do not stand for any nonsense. Recent changes to Health and Safety legislation allows 16 and 17 year olds to work on some types of construction site. YOS has a support role and takes a lead in some of this training.

The overall picture of training for young offenders who are past statutory school age is fragmented. Colleges tend to try to get young people to fit round their courses, but when they engage well and build courses around young people's interests, those young people are so much better engaged. In North West Kent there is a fishing club which is popular with many young people. This involves an education programme which is themed around fishing, and has proved successful and a good way to engage young people by building a learning element around their existing interest.

What happens when a student starts to offend? Is there any typical pattern or identified route into this?

You cannot generalise about patterns as every case is different, and there are many routes into, and reasons for, offending. If a child has grown up with poverty and worklessness, behavioural problems can start in Primary School. The transition from Primary to Secondary School offers an opportunity to iron out difficulties, but a child might start to truant at this stage. If they are in school they may exhibit disruptive behaviour, so a school may choose to introduce a reduced timetable or try home schooling at this stage. If parents have not worked for years they will have no knowledge of the work scene to pass on to their child, and often no aspirations or inspiration to offer. Once a young person starts to miss school, they mix with others who have opted out and start on a downward spiral. If their parents do not value education and are not able to direct them, we need to address and aim to change the

attitude of the whole family. We need to find something a young person wants to do; something which does not include a classroom. If you can engage them in something which interests them, often they will shine.

As an offender, are they sent away from their family? How and when do they come back, and how is it for them when they do come back? How can we help with this experience?

The number of young people being taken into custody now is 33% lower than it was five years ago, as the Police now try to deal with as many as possible informally and avoid custody. We work with the Police and others as part of a measured, multi-agency approach. There are always a few custody cases, and until five years ago they could have been sent anywhere in the UK, eg Bristol or Tyneside, so families would have had difficulty in visiting. Now, 90 - 95% of those who receive a short sentence (ie up to 2 years) go to Cookham Wood near Rochester. They are much nearer home, so can maintain family links, and are nearer the education services they are likely to access upon their release, so are able to establish better links and achieve more continuity. Staying within the county also helps the resettlement service to establish links with them before they are released.

Do many young offenders have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)?

Yes, and we work with NHS colleagues and the CAMHS service to address their needs. There is more understanding of the condition now. It is known that 70% of adult males in custody have been concussed at least once in their lives. We use speech and language programmes and other assessment tools to address this. Many might not have been able to follow classes at school, and so dropped out or became disruptive, as they had trouble understanding the language.

Why are there fewer young offenders in custody now?

Because their behaviour was previously more criminalised than it is now. Many Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) were given out and they started to lose their effectiveness, so Kent saw limited value in using ASBOs and now looks more at addressing the attitudes and behaviour of a young person and their whole family. If young people are criminalised early, they establish criminal habits, which then worsen as they age. They start into a custody career, which then escalates. We apply a social rather than a criminal model and aim to help a family rather than criminalise them. There has been a real reduction in youth crime as a result, but there is also a change in the way we define it.

Is community service more effective than locking someone up?

Restorative justice, in which an offender has to engage with their victim, allows closure. We are hoping for a Green Paper which will develop this idea. There is much use of restorative justice in Northern Ireland. Rehabilitation is now favoured rather than punishment.

Are there preventative measures which aim to avoid offending?

There is a Youth Justice Board Grant of £600,000 a year, which funds a Youth Worker Panel to support young people who are at risk of offending. Most referrals to this Panel are received via schools. They work directly with young people, using individual programmes, and are effective in reducing offending. The number of young people offending for the first time has been reduced by 33%, due to joint working initiatives involving the Police and the YOS.

Can you tell us a bit about school refusers?

Young people refuse to attend school mainly due to fear. A parent's negative attitude to school will colour their child's view of school, and will start them on a downward spiral. Parenting work has been very effective in challenging this. The numbers of young people who actually refuse to go to school are quite low, although they may have issues with engaging and staying once they are there.

There are two centres which work with refusers on the ISS programme; these are Sittingbourne Youth Centre at New House and The Quarterdeck at Ramsgate. Members of the Select Committee are very welcome to visit either of them.

The 'Challenger' and 'Schools Force' initiatives visit schools to speak to young people, but what happens if a young person then drops out or is excluded? What signposting or information are they offered?

I have come across an army training initiative set up by a Brigadier and run by serving soldiers, which uses army training methods on young people. Youngsters camp for one week at a time, dressed in army uniform and following army discipline techniques. There are no fences to keep them in but they are encouraged to stay. They are viewed and assessed by a psychologist. This offers a three- to six-month programme which seeks to replace or reduce costly youth custody. It costs £98 per day to put one young person through this sort of programme. At the end of the course each young person gets a certificate, and many of them are inspired to go on and join the army. However, initiatives such as this seem to be difficult to signpost or connect to, which is very frustrating.

Yes, much 16+ provision has only short-term funding which is unpredictable from year to year. This area needs some continuity. There has been some progress with Higher and Further Education colleges. Experience has been varied but there is a protocol in place now about what a young person should expect to receive in terms of pastoral support. All Higher and Further Education colleges have a YOS link person to help a young person settle into college and also to complete an application form for college. There is more work to do with colleges on their provision and flexibility.

How can the Select Committee help the YOS with its work?

You could get colleges to sign up to the needs of vulnerable learners.

Colleges get paid on results – wouldn't this create a barrier? The Wolf report could help with this.

Apprenticeships are another area where the Committee could help. The KCC needs to put its money where its mouth is! I have one apprentice in my team, whose allowance of £105 per week is funded via KCC. KCC could encourage other public sector bodies to take on this sort of scheme. A good example of any scheme run in Kent or by KCC could be promoted to other councils, to raise the profile of what Kent does.