

## Longford Community Resources Clg

### SICAP Case Study 2019

As directed by the County Longford Local Community Development Committee, this paper is a case study on Longford Community Resources Clg's work with the Roma community. It seeks to respond to the SICAP Case Study Theme 1 'Engagement Strategies with SICAP Target Groups'.

#### **Background**

Members of the Roma community have been engaging with Longford Community Resources Clg on an individual basis over the years. Figures captured on Pobal's Iris database system between 2015-2017 show that eight individuals registered with SICAP during that period identified themselves as Roma. However staff would be aware that during that time and in previous and more recent years, people known to be Roma were availing of education, training, employment and enterprise supports, through SICAP and TUS, yet not declaring themselves to be from the Roma community<sup>1</sup>. (For example, one particular family had been accessing supports from SICAP staff for over 10 years and it is only this year that one member of the family stated to the Enterprise Worker that he is Roma).

Whilst SICAP staff knew that there were a small number of Roma families living in County Longford for a long time, from our own work on the ground, and hearing from agencies such as the HSE, schools, the Education and Training Board, Intreo etc, we in Longford Community Resources Clg became aware of the very significant increase in the number of Roma people taking up residency in County Longford in the past couple of years.

From our work and this interagency collaboration we knew that the majority of the Roma now residing in Longford are living in the poorer areas of the County, many in overcrowded conditions, with low levels of English, many are unemployed or in low paid and precarious employment, and that up-take of health, education and other services can be limited.

The very real concern was, and is, that the Roma living here in County Longford, instead of integrating into the community, would become more and more marginalised and thus at greater risk of poverty and social exclusion.

We therefore decided, back in 2018, that special measures needed to be put in place to engage with and work with the Roma community in order to try and promote the inclusion of Roma in County

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<sup>1</sup> 2018-2019 – There are 3 people registered as Roma (1 from Romania and 2 from Slovakia). There are a total of 6 Romanians and 28 Slovaks registered.

2015-2017 – There were 8 people registered as Roma (7 from Romania and 1 from Lithuania). There are a total of 9 Romanians and 27 Slovaks registered.

Longford, supporting and encouraging their participation across all sections of society. The challenge for Longford Community Resources Clg would be where to find the staffing resources to carry out this work, as SICAP staff were already at full capacity with existing commitments.

We knew that what we needed for this work was a community worker with a specific remit around Roma who would work with our youth workers, employment and enterprise workers, other Longford Community Resources Clg staff, and relevant agencies and organisations. Their role would be to implement community development strategies working with Roma on issues such as accommodation, health, education, training, employment and discrimination. This would involve working with Roma both individually and collectively; working with local service providers and national organisations such as Pavee Point; and raising issues relating to Roma with relevant policy makers – both locally and nationally.

### **The Initial Approach in 2018**

#### ***Application to the Department of Justice and Equality***

In October 2018 the Department of Justice and Equality put out a call for proposals for employment-focused initiatives including social enterprise with Roma with a closing date of 16<sup>th</sup> November 2018. Whilst we had identified that we needed a community development worker as outlined above, we felt that a similar approach could be taken around employment and thus applied to the Department of Justice and Equality for an 'Employment Worker with Roma' who, working in collaboration with other Longford Community Resources Clg staff and other service providers, would take a holistic approach and undertake a number of both short term and longer term strategies to address Roma unemployment.

#### ***Researcher Regarding Roma***

Keen to see progress in the area of Roma engagement, with the application to the Department of Justice and Equality submitted, an opportunity presented itself towards the end of 2018 to employ a part-time researcher to undertake a scoping exercise regarding Roma living in County Longford. The researcher was employed from 26<sup>th</sup> November 2018 to the end of December 2018. Their work involved providing a synopsis of current Government strategy with regard to Roma; linking with a range of service providers in the County to develop a broad profile of the Roma population in County Longford; ascertaining from those service providers what they, the service providers, felt were the main issues facing Roma in County Longford; looking at the work that organisations outside of County Longford who are engaging with Roma, such as Pavee Point, have undertaken; and making recommendations on strategies which Longford Community Resources Clg could potentially undertake in working with Roma people.

We were very clear that this piece of research was solely about consultation with service providers. We did not wish the researcher to talk to members of the Roma community on this occasion as we did not want to raise any expectations or begin to build up relationships which we could not follow through on.

#### ***Results of the Research***

The research highlighted aspects of the Government's 'National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (2017 – 2020)' and Pavee Point's 'Roma in Ireland – A National Needs Assessment'.

The researcher met with staff from a range of organisations locally, including:- Longford Community Resources Clg, Longford Westmeath Education and Training, St. Josephs National School, Community Mothers, Youthreach Longford, the HSE Public Health Nurse and Community Mental Health Social Worker, Citizens Information Longford, Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Education Welfare Service, National Learning Network, EDI Centre for Unemployed People, and LEAP Project (Garda Youth Diversion Project). All the services offered to help in any way they could with any future initiatives with Roma. In addition, the researcher consulted with Pavee Point, Donegal Travellers Project and Tallaght Roma Integration Project, who were also very supportive and gave valuable insight into their experience of working with Roma.

In attempting to assemble a profile of the community, an assessment of figures on the numbers of Roma living in County Longford would have been very beneficial but the researcher found that there are no official figures as 'Roma' is not an ethnic identifier on the census form and where ethnic data is gathered, such as in schools (and SICAP as stated above), people are often reluctant to identify as Roma (possibly due to historical discrimination).

The researcher was, however, able to compile some of the issues for Roma in County Longford as identified by the service providers interviewed. These included:-

- That some members of the Roma community in Longford do not have PPS numbers (possibly the difficulty of completing paperwork could be a barrier).
- Communication issues; very low levels of English, with children and friends often used for interpreting (which is not ideal when serious, sensitive or complex issues are presented). Yet many of the adults are reluctant to take up English classes.
- Overcrowding, with different generations living together in poor accommodation.
- A significant number of single mothers with large families; and young parents (under 26 years of age).
- Women presenting late in pregnancy (with social workers flagged as a result).
- Issues around nutrition, both pre and post-natal.
- Low levels of immunisation.
- Developmental issues, with home school liaison officers reporting that referrals to occupational therapy, dental and speech and language therapy are high for the Roma community, while attendance at appointments is poor.
- Some Roma people have been noted travelling to Dublin for GP care as GPs in Longford are full.
- Very low levels of uptake of the 2 years free ECCE pre-school places.
- School attendance and educational attainment tend to be lower than average.
- High levels of unemployment and a perceived lack of interest in gaining employment, with a number of people involved in casual work such as cutting turf.
- Not identifying as Roma.

#### *Recommendations from the Research*

The researcher, informed by consultation with Pavee Point, Donegal Travellers Project and the Tallaght Roma Integration Project, highlighted the need to apply a community work approach in working with the Roma community. There was an overwhelming emphasis from these organisations on the element of relationship building, trust and the time that is needed to achieve this in order to set solid foundations for community work. They also stressed the importance of Roma participation at every stage of the process, using interpreters and key people within the community to break down barriers and allay any fears at the outset. The researcher noted a resource, developed by the

Migrants Rights Centre of Ireland, on engaging migrants using a community development approach which could be a useful toolkit to apply with Roma.

### ***Outcome of Application to the Department of Justice and Equality***

Unfortunately we learnt, in late December 2018, that our application to the Department of Justice and Equality for an 'Employment Worker with Roma' had been unsuccessful (7 projects across the country had been granted funding).

### **The Approach in 2019**

The research undertaken at the end of 2018 had reinforced our belief that we needed to employ a community worker to work with Roma. Immediately at the start of January we wrote to the Department of Justice and Equality asking that should extra funding become available, that they would consider giving further grants for work with Roma. In addition, we wrote to the National Social Inclusion Office in the HSE, outlining the findings from our research and asking if they had any funding available for the employment of a community worker with Roma.

Whilst we were without a dedicated worker to commence specific community development actions with Roma we do employ youth workers - Longford Community Resources Clg, under the SICAP Programme manages the County Longford Youth Service (with funding from SICAP and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs through Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board). So, again taking on board issues highlighted in the research, in planning for the year, we were able to name Roma as a priority target group for the Youth Service and shift focus towards Roma youth (as was in line with national approach under the Department of Children and Youth Affairs).

### ***Longford Community Resources Clg's County Longford Youth Service***

Thus, in February and March Longford Community Resources Clg youth work staff began detached work on the streets where we knew – and had had it confirmed by other service providers through our research – that members of the Roma community were living. This was then followed in April and May with targeted outreach in these areas, with two youth workers calling to the areas consistently each week for six weeks, introducing themselves and having general conversations with the young people and the parents/adults who were around.

During this period Longford Community Resources Clg Youth Service staff were running a youth group in the Mall sports and recreation park. A group of young Roma men had been hanging around when the group was on so the youth workers approached them and asked if they would like to get involved. The young men said that they would like to get involved with the Youth Service but they would not join the existing youth group that was running in the Mall. It was therefore decided to set up a specific youth group for young Roma males and to invite these particular young men and others known through outreach to join. In addition, the Youth Service Co-ordinator met with the Education Welfare Officer and asked her to refer any young Roma men who were experiencing difficulties with school attendance to the group.

Getting parents to come to consent for their child to join the group was initially a difficulty. So youth workers went to the young men's homes, met with parents (some of whom they already knew

through the outreach work), explained to them the purpose of the youth group, and helped them with filling in consent forms. The young Roma men's group began meeting in May and has continued to meet since, with an average of 15 young men attending each week.

### ***The Employment of a Community Worker with Roma***

By April, as no funding for a fulltime community worker with Roma had been forthcoming, we took the decision to use some of our own private funds to employ a temporary worker for two days per week from May to August. We were concerned about the sustainability of the post and did not wish to raise expectations of either members of the Roma community and other service providers. However, we decided that given the clear need to take action to support the Roma community, we should capitalise on the inroads that the Youth Service was making with Roma, and the offers of support from other agencies garnered through the research in December, and employ a worker with the main role of engaging Roma and encouraging up-take of services, including SICAP (as this was the maximum we could offer given the limited time and duration).

Fortunately, the community worker who had undertaken the Roma research on our behalf was available and started back with us on 30<sup>th</sup> May. Given the worker's familiarity, she was immediately able to begin working on actions with Longford Community Resources Clg SICAP and Youth Service staff and with staff from other organisations.

Consulting with the young Roma men in the Youth Service group and with Roma staff in Pavee Point, the worker developed a publicity leaflet to give to Roma and service providers which she got translated into different languages with the help of a staff member in the Citizens Information Service.

One of the public health nurses, whom the community worker had met whilst doing the research, took a keen interest and was extremely helpful. She was able to show the community worker exactly where the different groups of Roma (by nationality) live and explain to her the dynamics between the different nationalities. This was very useful for the community worker and the Youth Service staff when doing outreach.

### ***Co-Working Between the Community Worker and the Youth Service***

Young Roma women, whom the youth workers had met through their outreach work, had requested that a group be started for them. Their parents were very reluctant to allow the young women to attend the Longford Community Resources Clg main building, where our youth facility is, as they felt that it was too far away from their homes for the girls to go to (the building is just over one kilometre away from where many of the Roma live). So the Youth Service staff and the Community Worker with Roma met with the parents to assure them that the young women would be minded, and initiated the group in June in Longford Community Resources Clg Traveller Primary Healthcare Project offices which is next to some of the young women's homes. At the beginning of each group, the workers would meet the group on the street and walk them to the office and likewise at the end of the group staff would walk them back to their homes.

Many of the activities that the young women wanted to do could not be done in the Primary Healthcare Project building as it was too small so it was agreed with parents that the group would

move to the main building for the summer months. The parents were happy with this and had agreed to walk their daughters to the group. The community worker arranged to have a coffee morning for the parents while their daughters attended the group. Unfortunately the group did not attend over summer for a variety of reasons – including family weddings, holidays and looking after younger siblings. The youth group recommenced in the Primary Healthcare Project office in September and will hopefully move to the main building soon.

### ***Application to the Ireland Funds***

In August 2019 a further application was made for funding for a community worker with Roma, this time to the Ireland Funds. Sadly this application was unsuccessful.

### **Outcomes from the Engagement**

Through the engagement work of the Youth Service, two youth groups for Roma were established and will continue to operate. A number of the Roma young men who are over 16 years of age are now attended an integrated drop in group run by the Youth Service on Friday nights.

Youth workers have supported a number of the young people from the groups, linking with the SICAP Education and Employment Mediator, in accessing courses – assisting them through the application and induction process and providing them with support and encouragement.

Parents who had been met by youth workers and the community worker during outreach are now approaching Youth Service staff seeking support for themselves in relation to English classes and employment and these people are being referred to relevant SICAP staff.

Through the work of the community worker, services were reminded of the SICAP supports available to Roma, and consequently, one home school liaison officer and the public health nurse are looking to develop further actions with Longford Community Resources Clg.

### **Obstacles to Engagement**

Over the past year, a number of obstacles have presented themselves:-

- Obviously, not having a dedicated community worker to work with Roma was and is a major obstacle in seeking to address issues affecting members of the Roma community in County Longford.
- A lack of trust (for example, a number of young people gave false names for a couple of weeks) possibly based on a fear of authority.
- Perceived danger of going anywhere other than their own areas. (Some parents have told youth workers they believe that Longford is dangerous).
- Difficulty getting young women involved in groups as culture dictates that they have duties at home – cooking, cleaning etc, and parents are more protective of them than their male siblings/peers. The young men have much more freedom.
- Many Roma in Longford go back to their country of origin during the summer or go to stay with relatives so it is hard to engage with them during the summer months.

## Lessons Learned

- Roma, while they may share a lot of cultural characteristics and experiences, are not a homogenous group. People are from different nationalities (Slovakian, Romanian, Czech, Hungarian etc) and don't necessarily identify collectively across these nationalities. Therefore, there is a need to differentiate in approach.
- Many Roma face a multitude of issues – poverty, low levels of English, low levels of education etc – which coupled with a fear of authority, can seriously impede their ability/desire to engage with services and supports.
- In order to adequately support the inclusion of Roma, engaging them and working with them to address the root causes of the issues which lead to their marginalisation, a professional community worker taking a community development approach<sup>2</sup> is required. This worker should have excellent social analysis and understanding of the issues faced by a minority ethnic group such as Roma; and excellent knowledge of community development principles and practice and how to apply these.
- In order to adequately support the involvement of young Roma, professional youth workers applying developmental youth work methodologies are required. Again, staff must have excellent social analysis and understanding of the issues faced by Roma, as well as developmental youth work skills.
- Consulting with other organisations with expertise such as Pavee Point and the Migrant Rights Centre prior to commencing and during the engagement is very important. They can provide useful insights from their experience which can help guide and inform the approach.
- Collaboration within the Local Development Company is vital, for example, youth work staff linking with employment staff, with Tus staff etc.
- Collaboration with outside agencies is also vital. For example, as illustrated above, the public health nurse bringing the community worker with Roma to see where the different families live and explaining the dynamics.
- The detached and outreach work of the youth service worked well in engaging young people and provided an inroad for the community worker to meet with adults. Linking with people from marginalised groups such as Roma requires a lot of hanging round on streets and knocking on doors.
- Staff need to be consistent and persistent in their approach, for example, turning up every week during outreach to show commitment and interest.

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<sup>2</sup> Community development as outlined in the Government's '*Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A Five-Year Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland 2019-2024*'

- A great deal of time, when trying to engage both Roma adults and Roma youth, needs to be given to building trust and developing relationships. Identifying influential members of the community and garnering their help in encouraging people is really important, as is the use of professional interpreters where possible.
- Groups have to be started close to where people live or even in people's homes.
- Once engaged, many Roma need considerable 'hand holding' to support their involvement and develop the capacity to participate independently. For example, it took the SICAP Employment and Education Mediator and a youth worker many phone calls, text messages and three missed appointments before one young Roma woman made it to the office for help in applying for a course.
- As with any youth or community work action, there needs to be a level of flexibility to change the approach to best suit the needs. And even when people don't turn up, keep trying!

#### **What's Next....**

For the Youth Service, now that trust has been established with the young women's group and the parents have built up confidence in the Youth Service, the group will move to a bigger, more suitable venue and seek to expand the number of young Roma women attending. The young Roma men's group will continue and, as and when appropriate, the young men will be encouraged to participate in other youth groups and youth work activities.

In terms of adults, SICAP staff will continue to seek to respond to the needs of Roma in County Longford within existing resources, particularly in working with the home school liaison worker and the public health nurse. At the same time, we will continue to try every avenue to secure a much needed community worker with Roma for County Longford.

#### **Conclusion**

It is well documented that the Roma community has faced generations of racism and discrimination and as a result are a guarded and elusive community, but with the correct supports in place the Roma community will not only have direct needs met in terms of supports around accommodation, employment, education, health etc, but they will in turn begin to feel respected and connected members of the community which has a lasting impact on the generations to come and the wider community around them.