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## Introduction

*Discrimination against Gypsies and Travellers appears to be the last “respectable” form of racism. It is still considered acceptable to put up “No Traveller” signs in pubs and shops and to make blatantly prejudiced remarks about Gypsies and Travellers.*

(Trevor Phillips, former Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, 2004)

This is the context in which this good practice guide has been developed; it aims to assist social workers, foster carers, and others working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children who are subjects of social work interventions, including those who are living in care. It is written from a perspective that recognises the need for better practice if Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are going to be well supported to live safely with their birth families, and, where children do need to enter care, to grow up with a strong sense of pride in their cultural identity and heritage.

This good practice guide is structured in the following way:

**Chapter 1** serves to introduce the issues, and **Chapter 2** describes the various individual groups and communities who come together under the wider terms of “Gypsy”, “Roma” and “Traveller”. **Chapter 3** looks at the social policy context, focusing on accommodation, education, health, social work and criminal justice matters. **Chapter 4** discusses the cultures, traditions and beliefs of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people to the extent that it is possible without making stereotypes about these matters, and **Chapter 5** sets out the legal framework in the UK for working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and families, and considers what that means in practice.

In some ways, the chapters that make up the first half of the guide constitute a detailed background of what needs to be understood before moving on to the more specific aspects of what it means to work with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in a social work context. **Chapter 6** then summarises the work by Allen (2013), who explored the experiences of Gypsies and Travellers who lived in care as children, and **Chapter 7** sets out the need for an anti-discriminatory approach to casework, looking at engaging with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, children’s rights, advocacy and empowerment. **Chapter 8** offers a framework that promotes the development of cultural competence in working with or looking after Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children,

and **Chapter 9** discusses issues in family and friends care, fostering, adoption and leaving care. **Chapter 10** brings together the various themes in a conclusion with recommendations, and useful organisations are listed at the end of the guide.

Before setting out, it is important to recognise that there are some very obvious limitations to this good practice guide. The idea of writing something that deals with, and actively includes all Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups in the same short publication is challenging because such attempts to generalise always carry a risk of stereotyping. It is nevertheless felt to be better to risk this than to exclude specific groups, particularly as experience of discrimination and oppression is likely to be much the same across all the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. For this reason, the principles of good practice with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and families are widely applicable.

It is also the case that any "culture" will be hard to accurately describe, consisting as these groups do of many different families and individuals. One option to address this difficulty would be to avoid descriptions of group culture and history entirely, but this would have produced a guide that was so vague as to be of little value to the reader. With this in mind, however, it is important to be careful about how this guide is used, always remembering that individual children and families are the experts on themselves, their culture, and their own situations.

It needs to be acknowledged that research in this subject area is limited. With the notable exceptions of Cemlyn (2000a; 2000b; 2006; 2008) Garrett (2002; 2004a; 2004b; 2005) Morran (2001; 2002) and Power (2004), there has been little discussion about these issues in social work arenas. Neither has there been much effort to seek community perspectives in a structured and meaningful way, leaving a fairly blank canvas on which to set out the issues.

This guide is written to recognise the context of discrimination and oppression experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. It is written from a perspective that recognises the current weaknesses of social care (and other state provision) in relation to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, and in particular acknowledges that the needs of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are not well met in the care system. Whilst these concerns are set out, it is important to note that this guide does not blame social workers and others for poor practice. It is recognised that social work takes place in a complex societal structure, and that this structure determines the context and organisation of social work practice. However, neither is it suggested that social workers should be complacent, and the guide clearly suggests that practitioners and others need to better understand Gypsy, Roma and Traveller cultures, mores and traditions. On this basis, it sets out what is required to achieve an anti-discriminatory approach within a culturally competent framework of care.

Where possible, the guide attempts to offer a positive way forward, at the same time acknowledging societal realities. At times there is clear direction about what constitutes good practice; at other times, the text sets out the challenges and dilemmas that need to be considered within the context of practice generally, and in meeting the needs of an individual, family, group or community. Engaging with the issues is a first step in better understanding how to work effectively with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and how to better parent and care for children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds. The challenge that follows this is to improve the outcomes for all Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children.