

GRT HE Inclusion project

Supporting GRT people into higher education and developing inclusive practices in schools

The project was set up to work with schools in Sussex to the needs of Gypsy Roma and Traveller (GRT) young people in relation to accessing higher education. It aimed to:

- identify improvements in their response to the needs of GRT learners in KS4 and KS5
- give GRT learners the opportunity to have their voices listened to
- encourage closer links between schools, local authorities and other agencies involved in supporting GRT inclusion
- use knowledge gained from the project to inform future work and share good practice with other schools in Sussex and beyond.



The first part of the project took place between March to July 2021, with elements that couldn't be delivered due to the Covid-19 pandemic occurring in 21/22. This latter work included providing careers support for Year 9 and 10 students (Year 11s having already been prioritised), delivering workshops at Steyning Grammar School and conducting real-life visits to higher and further education institutes.

METHODOLOGY

The project lead approached both local authorities in Sussex to propose a bid to support GRT inclusion in their regions. West Sussex County Council (WSCC) submitted a competitive proposal to address transition in KS4, with clear aims, deliverable outcomes and a vision for sustainable change. While it originally proposed working with four West Sussex secondary schools with high known numbers of GRT learners, Covid pressures meant that only three of these took part: Steyning Grammar School (an academy) and community schools The Weald in Billingshurst and Imberhorne in East Grinstead.

Each school was asked to:

- create a learner workshop, with support from Friends, Families and Travellers outreach workers and resources designed by the project team, to help GRT young people explore their future educational paths
- offer tailored careers information, advice and guidance for GRT learners delivered by WSCC careers advisers
- share 'Roads From the Past', a film created by Travellers Times (a respected GRT media outlet) to celebrate GRT History Month in assemblies, tutor groups and PSHE sessions

PROJECT SUMMARY

Context

Only around 200 Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) young people access higher education in the UK each year. (Office for Students, 2022). Factors for this underrepresentation include poor progression through compulsory schooling shaped by complex factors such as racism and cultural misrepresentation. Improving GRT access to HE isn't straightforward but making college and school staff aware of the specific challenges GRT learners face and providing staff with the information and training to tackle these issues is a step in the right direction.

Duration

March to July 2021

Partners

Council's Careers Department and Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service (EMTAS) team; Friends, Families and Travellers; Steyning Grammar School, The Weald Community School and Imberhorne School

Funding source

Uni Connect Community Fund

- deliver activities to promote a positive awareness and understanding of GRT culture among pupils and school staff, with the support of Friends, Families and Travellers. Activities included GRT-focused assemblies, art and cooking workshops and celebrations for GRT History Month
- work with widening participation and academics at the University of Sussex to develop policies and practices to support GRT inclusion in their own organisations.

The project team worked to provide oversight, resources and support to WSCC on effective KS4 outreach, GRT- specific cultural awareness and evaluation. This 'light-touch' approach enabled local authorities to take ownership of this important work and improve working relations with these schools with high levels of GRT learners. Regular meetings were held to share progress and ideas, creating a cross-school network that made ongoing connections possible.

IMPACT

Evaluation of the project's impact on current and future practice was based on surveys completed by WSCC staff and those leading the project in schools, alongside participants' artworks. The project demonstrated a number of positive impacts among GRT students, their peers, school staff and others involved, including:

Increasing the profile of and opportunities for GRT learners: 11 GRT pupils took part in the learner workshops and three worked with WSCC careers advisers on career interviews. The career workshops were initially for Year 11 students and these numbers increased in 21/22 when the project expanded to include Year 9 and 10 students and Steyning Grammar School. This represented a significant step for the school and WSCC in delivering targeted support for GRT learners focusing on KS4 progression.

Building confidence and engagement among GRT students: Participants' feedback on the workshops was very positive and the artwork they created suggests they developed confidence and engaged with their GRT culture and history and how it might shape their future. A NERUPI outreach evaluation framework demonstrated success for our project learners in areas of Know (developing knowledge and awareness of the benefits of HE and graduate employment) and Become (developing the confidence and resilience to negotiate the challenges of university life and graduate progression).

Greater connectivity between key stakeholders, practitioners and organisations. Through the project, WSCC developed a positive new working relationship with its EMTAS team and with the three participating schools, which hadn't worked with any external partners before. The schools also connected with each other to share progress and ideas during project meetings. The WSCC lead stated that: 'The benefits of the project already seem huge as the relationships have developed and the opportunities for conversations around these issues are already suggesting new directions and areas to focus on.' A key impact is connecting these services together and raising awareness of the value of a network of practitioners working towards GRT inclusion and sharing good practice in the region and beyond.



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Feedback from workshop coordinators, WSCC staff and students included the following statements:

'The project has enabled us to connect with a number of young people who we probably wouldn't have linked with. As a result, they are now thinking about their aspirations and... we anticipate these impacts will remain in the long term'.
Community outreach worker, Friends, Families and Travellers

'Staff have told me that the project positively challenged both their own and their students' perceptions of the GRT community.'
Representative, The Weald Community School

'Our GRT students were so pleased and excited when they saw the GRT flag hung up and keen, off the back of this, to tell me all about their culture. Having their people represented at the school is massive for them.'
Representative, The Weald Community School

'I'm keen that this work continues in future – that is, speaking to and planning with GRT students how we can share information about their heritage and continue to promote the GRT community.'
Representative, Imberhorne School

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The project met its original goal of moving beyond surface-level awareness-raising to creating the space and resources for meaningful change and ongoing inclusion work. It resulted in attitudinal changes within the schools and recognition among practitioners from the schools and WSCC of their own lack of attention to the needs of GRT learners and their extended communities. It is clear from this project that the key to supporting pathways into higher education for GRT learners is working closely with teachers, careers leaders and pupils in schools.

There is considerable appetite and enthusiasm for GRT inclusion work in local authorities and schools. However, for this happen to effectively requires funding, resources, access to good practice models and networks to share experiences and ideas. This suggests a potential gap in the sector in providing this expertise and strategic oversight.

There is significant value in working with GRT young people to support KS4 progression. While many learners in our project remained unsure about higher education, worksheets completed by them listed varied and ambitious plans for their futures including joining the forces, working in the family business, learning languages, earning more money and becoming a doctor. Some of the barriers to higher education they identified included fees and costs and a lack of knowledge. While GRT inclusion work prioritises school retention as a 'minimum' goal, it's also important to support GRT learners' ongoing progression towards or into higher education as a possible future.

Accessing the 'right' people in schools to do this work can be challenging. For example, inclusion manager roles are different in scope across schools and GRT isn't always their remit. There is a need for flexibility and creativity in working with schools so that GRT inclusion work (and other related work with ethnic minority learners, including anti-racism and decolonising the curriculum projects) doesn't fall between responsibilities.



TALKING POINTS

- The project instigated powerful awareness-raising for teachers and pupils of the history and culture of Gypsy, Roma and Travellers. How do we ensure that this work leads to meaningful and sustainable change in attitudes, practices and policies?
- The project showed us how we can work in positive ways with colleagues in multiple locations across Sussex. What is the potential value of scaling up this work nationally and internationally?

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