"Gloke at our Gailles on the Path to Pre-School"

Southside Travellers' Pilot Early Education Programme (2010)

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SOUTHSIDE TRAVELLERS action group

Table of Contents

Director's Foreword		3
1	Background and Context	4
2	Making it Happen: Planning and Development	6
3	Tuesday's @11 in the Resource Centre	8
4	Achievements and Challenges	9
5	10 Steps Forward	11

Acknowledgements

It sounds easy, but as this report shows, a huge amount of sheer determination and hard work made "Our Gailles" happen. It would not have been possible without the leadership, support, good heartedness, guidance (and musical abilities) of Angela Stenson from Southside Partnership. We must acknowledge the huge energy and enthusiasm Carol Connors (who has carried the torch for this work for many years), Alison Corr, Margaret (Mooey) Doyle, Kitty Connors and Margaret McDonagh brought to this very special project. I must also acknowledge the human resources provided by FAS and the recognition of the importance of ensuring that children's emotional and social health remains a priority shown by our Community Health and Well-Being Programme. Dun Laoghaire VEC's *Family Learning Project* and donations from our community funded the pilot project, and we are very thankful to them for this.

Foreword

For more years than anyone in Southside Travellers cares to remember, Southside Travellers Action Group has named services and supports for young children and their parents as a key priority. In November 2009, we completed our strategic plan *Building for the Future* and yet again, the same priority emerged. Following one of those *"interesting conversations"* with Angela Stenson, we decided to see what would happen if we just went ahead and created a space in the Centre for parents and their young children to participate in a programme which would facilitate Traveller children to access the free pre-school year in September 2010.

Everyone in the house agreed that this would have to be a programme that straddled our programmes and we put in place a project team that included our Education Programme Manager, our Children and Young People's Programme Manager, our newly designated Parent and Toddler facilitator and Parent Support Workers. Just one month later, our Board room was transformed into a children's play space and everyone in the Centre was enchanted by the sound of small children and their parents (and grand-parents) singing, Angela playing guitar and a litany of small voices shouting *"Don't let the pigeon drive the bus"*. On May 25th, Southside Travellers hosted its first annual **Toddler Graduation** ceremony and in September 2010, the current group will be entering pre-schools throughout the county and we will be embedding the pilot into our mainstream resource Centre programme - with the continued support of Southside Partnership and programme funding from Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown County Childcare Committee. As well as being a path to pre-school for the parents and children involved, we see this very special project as being our first steps to developing services and supports for young children and their parents. Our journey is just beginning, we are delighted to be on it at last.

Catherine Morley (August 2010)

1 Background and Context

About Southside Travellers Action Group

Southside Travellers Action Group began life as South Dublin Travellers Support Group (SDTSG) in 1985, when a handful of Travellers and settled people tried to prevent the eviction of a group of Travellers camped beside a church in Foxrock. In those days, much of the work of the SDTSG was focused upon fighting evictions and upon helping families to pick up the pieces after them. Our organisation has grown since then and now employs 38 people (33 of whom are community members) who co-ordinate and staff our six core programmes of work:

- Financial, Operations and Resource Centre Management
- Promoting Awareness of Traveller Culture and Traditions
- Advocacy and Accomodation
- Community Health and Well-Being
- Developing the Potential of Traveller Children and Young People
- Education, Training and Employment Services and Supports

Our work is focused on the Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown area which is home to over 140 Traveller families living in both Traveller Specific and Settled accomodation. We operate within a specific "life cycle" emphasis, and work primarily with the following groupings within our community:

- Young children and their parents
- Young people (10 – 24)
- Women
- Men
- Lone parents
- Older People (45+)
- The long term unemployed
- Travellers experiencing homelessness
- Travellers experiencing addiction
- Travellers experiencing educational disadvantage/exclusion
- Travellers experiencing health inequalities
- Families on social welfare benefits / low incomes

As is the case in any community organisation, the range of issues emerging is as diverse as that particular community, and we are actively engaged in working with our community in the following key areas:

- Poverty and Social Exclusion – broad and specific impacts
- Advocacy
- Addressing the broad ranging discrimination experienced by Travellers
- Accomodation
- Information provision
- Supports to combat literacy issues
- Adult and Community Education
- Employment
- Training
- Accessing mainstream service and support provision

Inter-Agency Co-Operation in Action....

In addition to operating our core programmes of work, Southside Travellers is an active partner in the local development / social inclusion infrastructure across Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown and our organisation and community members are represented on:

- Local Traveller Accomodation Consultative Committee
- Social Development and Inclusion Committee
- Inter-Agency Steering Group for Travellers
- Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown Drugs Task Force

- Southside Partnership DLR
- Youth at Risk Network
- Anti-Racism and Diversity Network
- Local Education Committee
- Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown County Childcare Committee
- RAPID Community Network
- RAPID Family Support Task Group
- Traveller Interest Network
- Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Community Forum

Building for the Future: Southside Travellers' Action Group Strategic Plan (2010 – 2012)

The combination of our programmes and inter-agency work facilitates our community to have a real and active engagement with initiatives, structures and processes both within their local Traveller home places and across the county. During the last number of years, we have seen significant growth in Southside Travellers as a community development organisation funded by government departments and statutory agencies including the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, FAS, the VEC, Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown County Council, Southside Partnership and the Health Services Executive. In November 2009, we completed our Strategic Plan and the operational restructuring required to deliver on an ambitious strategy.

Local, Regional and National Allies and Partners

Southside Travellers Action Group is an active participant in the local, regional and national social inclusion infrastructure and works closely with the following organisations in achieving its vision of an **Ireland where the human and civil rights, hopes and distinct cultural identity of Travellers are acknowledged and respected**

- Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown Co. Council
- Southside Partnership
- Traveller Interest Network
- Integrated Local Community Development Members
- Inter-Agency Steering Group for Travellers
- DLR County Childcare Committee
- Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs
- Health Services Executive
- FAS
- Department of Education and Science
- Dun Laoghaire VEC
- Co. Dublin VEC
- Institute of Art and Technology, Dun Laoghaire
- Institute of Public Administration
- Pavee Point
- Irish Traveller Movement

Acknowledging and Taking Action on the Need for Early Education for Traveller Children and their Parents in Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown

Recent research commissioned by Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown County Childcare Committee (supported by Southside Travellers Action Group and Barnardo's) - ***Childcare Needs of the Traveller Community in Dún Laoghaire Rathdown*** - clearly identified the difficulties faced by all of the key statutory and community and voluntary agencies in their attempts to develop specific and supportive services for Traveller parents and their young children over the past number of years. In addition, it identified the very significant barriers and challenges experienced by Traveller parents in attempting to access mainstream provision. It makes a number of core recommendations under the headings:

1. Improving overall access;
2. An anti-bias approach;
3. Early care and afterschool care;
4. Supporting childcare at Southside Travellers;
5. Collaborating for success;
6. Representation of Travellers.

In November 2010, the completion of our strategy, the imminent implementation of the so called *free pre-school* year and the potential impact this could have on ensuring that Traveller children across the county led to Southside Travellers Action Group identifying the human and financial resources, as well as the space (which had always been a significant barrier), required to implement our pilot Early Education Programme. The analysis was complete, the time had come for action. To see, as previously, stated, what would happen if we created a real space within the organisation to support young children and their parents on the path to pre-school. This report charts that action, the creation of that space.

2 Making it Happen: Planning and Development

On Tuesday 2nd February 2010, Southside Travellers began a process to develop a parent and toddler group with a view to having eight to 10 preschool children ready to access the free preschool year in September 2010. From a management perspective, it was very important to identify an integrated team – comprising staff from our Adult and Community Education Programme, Health and Well-Being Programme and our Children and Young People's Programme.

The team that came together envisioned three key outcomes from this process:

- Building our organisational capacity to deliver and sustain a Parent and Toddler Group within the context of human, financial, skills and space constraints of Southside Travellers;
- Sourcing resources for parents in accessible formats which would outline the stages in early child development and encourage parents to see the value of preschool for the children, rather than as an aid to facilitate parents' needs;
- Running the group with a view to facilitate an understanding of the importance of transitions, for the children and the parents, in early childhood settings and ensuring that children remained the focus of the work at all times.

The work was developed and delivered with a relational focus from the outset. The importance of relationships between the group working to develop their capacity and to deliver the project was given priority in an understated way at all times. There was clarity of purpose and an acknowledgement of the variety of skill levels available to the process. This facilitated a respectful interaction between the group members. It also allowed members to acknowledge when they needed support to fulfil their role. This was then extended to the children and the parents/grandparents once the actual project got underway.

Keeping this focus at all times meant that we began to experience the power of a relational way of working and it made sense when we looked at extending it to the children. So concepts like "child led" "respecting each child as an individual" "offering focused positive attention to the children" "valuing the time with the children" were being internalised as the capacity building dimension of the project was occurring.

In practical terms the project development included

- Team building
- Discussions about the purpose
- Defining goals
- Breaking down tasks and allocating them
- Developing expectations that tasks were completed

Team building

This was part of every meeting in that the team initially defined the purpose and the means to bring it about. We had four full morning planning sessions before the children actually came in to the Centre. We then continued to meet for an hour before the session to review our plans and to continue to build the sense of team. We also met for an hour after each session. So team building was an intrinsic part of the whole experience

Purpose of the Integrated Team

Team members were very clear from the beginning that the purpose of this process was to offer a service to Traveller children in the Southside Travellers Resource Centre. On discussion, that purpose was extended to include the goal of having a small group of Traveller children ready to access the free Preschool year (ECCE) in September 2010. It was also decided that we would work with parents/families to develop an understanding of the significance of preschool for children and to ensure that pre-school was not just considered a form of childcare which would allow parents to access training and employment opportunities.

Defining Goals

Our goals were to:

- Work in a respectful way with each other and with those who chose to use the service;
- Develop the capacity of a group within Southside Travellers to design, develop and deliver an early education programme;
- Set up parent and toddler group;
- Have five children ready to access the free preschool year in September 2010

Outreach to families across Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown

In order to identify participants for the Programme, the team initially linked in with the Children and Young People's Programme who have a database of parents' contact details and children's names and ages and also the Community and Health and Well Being Programme who have contact details for some families with children who don't link in with the youth service. Leaflets were created detailing information about the group and these were distributed to families with children between two and a half and four - who were the target age for the group to avail of the free pre-school year starting in September 2010. Fifteen Families were contacted and informed of the programme. There was a follow up process whereby parents were contacted either through outreach work or by phone before the group started. In the final analysis, seven children and their parents agreed to participate in the Programme.

Planning and recording tasks

For an organisation like Southside Travellers that had long established the need to work with young children and their parents and had been unsuccessful (for a variety of external and internal reasons) in responding to that need, it was essential that the process of planning and developing the Our Gailles programme was accurately recorded and that tasks were allocated and achievements and challenges were noted. The following specific planning tasks were carried out:

- Learning how to take minutes;
- Setting up files to record the information;
- Setting up email accounts for the team;
- Understanding the role of worker on this team i.e. time keeping, use of mobile phones, attending all sessions, an understanding of the professional role i.e. once you came in to the space, what was happening outside, and in personal lives, had to be put on hold for the duration of the sessions;
- Joining IPPA, getting insurance, ensuring Garda vetting;
- Using IPPA's "Parent and Toddler Group" booklet;
- Contacting ; a Montessori Group in the locality and inviting the Manager to join us to help inform us as to what children are expected to be able to do when they join a preschool - this was to inform what we would include in our sessions
- Contacting Barnardos to request a session from their community development worker;
- Participating in that session;
- Visiting Barnardos Toy Library/Parent Toddler group in Dun Laoghaire;
- Developing Policies and Procedures including Health and Safety, First Aid, Child Protection;
- Child protection training for one team member(five others had this training);
- Attending conference on "Diversity in Early Childhood";
- Attending an evening training session on Planning and Play offered by Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Childcare Committee;
- Designing and printing registration forms for the children;
- Designing and printing permission forms to allow us to take photographs and to use those photographs to promote the work;
- Having a "Sign in book" and an "Accident book";
- Booking the room for the duration of the programme;
- Designing the space;
- Buying the toys/equipment;

- Sourcing culturally appropriate jigsaws;
- Being aware of diversity in the choice of toys;
- Sorting storage as the equipment had to be packed away after each session;
- Identifying families and looking for support within Southside Travellers to let people know about the programme
- Designing leaflets and getting them out to families;
- Understanding the developmental stages in early childhood;
- Sourcing materials to explain these stages;
- Planning the schedule for the sessions.;
- Being clear about why we choose activities and what we were trying to achieve with each activity.

Delivering the service

One of the key issues identified in the development of the project was the importance of the relationship between the workers and the children. We looked at how that could be defined and enhanced. We identified core areas of the work, like giving undivided attention to the children once they arrived in to the room. We looked at what that meant and how it could be delivered.

We named ways of achieving it, like being on the child's level, playing on the floor, allowing the children to direct their own play, watching for intimate interactions between parents/grandparents and children, and allowing them to develop. We agreed to try and capture some of these moments by photographing them and having these photographs for the children at the end of the programme. We also agreed that these moments between workers and children are what makes the sessions useful for children. We agreed to capture these on cameras also. As we had defined what we were trying to achieve it made it possible to achieve it. Workers became quite skilled in creating and recording these moments. Parents/grandparents observed it happening and gradually became more involved in the play themselves. Playing alongside children can be a difficult task for adults whether as workers or parents. We live in a society that has come to value independence in children and try's to set it up from very early in a child's life. So when children become involved in play adults often take this as a cue to "do the dishes" "make the beds" tidy the house". To move from this, to valuing the time spent playing alongside children, can be very challenging for all of us. We tried to experience the value of this in our interaction with the children and then to model how to do it for the parents. This was a very successful part of this programme.

3 Tuesday's @ 11 in the Resource Centre

The First Session

On the first morning of the Programme, there was huge excitement around the Centre, with the room (which the night before had been home to an Equestrian Skills Learning Session) laid out to look as exciting and stimulating as possible for the children. In the kitchen, snacks were prepared in advance. Baby changing facilities were installed in one of the bathrooms. At 9.30am, the team met to make sure that there was clarity around the morning's programme and to provide each other with support and guidance. At 10.30 the bus was despatched – with two workers accompanying the driver – to collect the parents and children. On arrival, the parents and children were greeted and introduced to the space and the team outlined the focus of the Programme, the schedule for the morning, got appropriate registration and consent forms and some simple ground rules which included:

- The focus would be on engaging the children in play. As the weeks progressed, we introduced elements of developmental play with a view to preparing the children for the more structured environment of pre-school;
- That parents/grandparents/team members would attempt to document, be aware of and reflect on moments of connection;
- The expectation that parents/grandparents would remain with the children throughout the morning;
- That parents/grandparents would try to join the children in their play – supported by the team;
- That parents/grandparents would endeavour to turn off/silence mobile telephones and not take calls whilst in the session;

The sense of excitement was palpable. Initially there were lots of fears; fears that we would have no children; that if we did have children they would not come back; that the toys were the "right" toys; that the children would want to take the toys home ; that the food was OK; that the children would like the place; that some Traveller women think it is more important to clean their homes than to play with their children; that they may not want to play with the children. The long history of wanting a service for children and not being able to provide it really did add to the sense of apprehension that first morning.

What did happen was that the children came in with their parents/grandparents and looked in awe at this lovely place with lovely toys and people ready to play with them. Slowly but surely they edged into the room towards the play area – all the time observing the adults. This was something new.

Eventually they relaxed into it and sat and played, and we sat on the floor and played with them. We had worked together to establish a sense that the most important part of the sessions was that the children felt there were adults available to just play. We had agreed to let the children take the lead and that the adults would play with whatever the children chose. It was lovely watching it unfold. Simple and easy. Playing.

It did happen. We did manage it, and as agreed we had three parts to each session. Free play, lunch, and a planned group activity like play dough, painting or singing. The free play was just that; children choosing toys and adults playing with them. It was working! Adults giving children their undivided attention means that children will connect and respond. It was true. The children were inviting us to play and all we had to do was respond. It could be done.

The transition to lunch also worked and the children helped to tidy away the toys and then set up for lunch. We had cheese and crackers, and apples, oranges, and fruit juice to drink. And the children ate and drank with gusto. They also then helped to tidy away the cups and plates , cleaned the tables and swept the floor. Workers and parents alike were amazed at the ease with which the children responded to requests for help. We had more difficulty letting the children do the jobs than trying to get them to do them. It could be done.

We also agreed to read a story each week and to give the parents of the children a book to take home with them each week to read to the children in between each session. Our first story "Don't let the Pigeon Drive the Bus" showed us the power of simple story telling as the children sat round on cushions and listened. They took up the chant "Don't let the Pigeon Drive the Bus" and responded whenever the pigeon got up to tricks. Capable, interested, children enjoying a story. Sounds simple yet it was transformative in that it proved again that "It could be done".

The singing was a real hit with the workers, the parents, and the children. The guitar was really well received and the children walked around looking at it and working out where the music was coming from. We had small percussion instruments for the children. They were allowed to choose their instrument and join in.Once we as workers, got over our own shyness the singing took off. The sound of the singing brought other workers to the windows of the room looking in at the lovely sight of their own community enjoying time together with adults and children singing their hearts out. It could be done.

And then it was over. Our first session was completed. We sat and reviewed what happened and noted moments of intimacy between children and workers. We looked at what caused them to occur, we noted what brought them about. We began to put words on experiences so we could replicate them. We congratulated ourselves and agreed that "It could be done"

This was replicated for the next 9 weeks.

4 Achievements and Challenges

We identified trust as a core value in the development and implementation of this programme. There were various levels of trust required for the process:
(i)Trust that the programme could work
(ii)Trust among staff internal and external
(iii)Trust among the community members- parents and children and to an extent the wider community
(iv)Trust among the parents that this was more important than staying at home
(v) Trust that the space was safe for them to "let their hair down" and play/sing themselves
(vi) And more importantly that the children trusted the adults and their engagement with them.

The programme team capture the achievements below:

We made it happen.
We created a space, on site, that children enjoyed.
We established very quickly that we were working to a common goal.
We brought together agencies to help us achieve this goal.
We learned about the importance of relationships.
We then used these relationships to develop a team where everybody had equal input and individual skills were acknowledged and utilised.
We learned that children are as interested in relationships as they are in toys.
We created a space that over the weeks also facilitated parents /grandparents getting involved and eventually coming to value it as a time where they could play and enjoy their children and everything else could wait.
We gathered information about developmental stages and circulated to parents.
We introduced stories and reading and encouraged parents/grandparents to read to the children between sessions.
We documented sessions through photography for the parents, grandparents and children and gave them to the parents.
We created a buzz around young children and introduced them in a powerful way into our work and centre. They had a space that was dedicated to them. It was the first direct service for this age group.

We had seven pre-school children who graduated at the end of this programme, four of whom have moved into local pre-schools, three who were not within the age range but who will return to our service.

In the team's review of the work, the following key challenges were identified:

- To create awareness that a space for children to come together and play in an environment specifically created for them is worthwhile. Up to this childcare was seen as a means to facilitate parents going to work.
- Ensuring there was sufficient time for pre-development work including giving clear information to the community about the programme.
- Creating a programme with very limited funding.
- Creating and packing away the service equipment in a limited space each week.
- Sourcing books that would have some relevance to the lives of the children and their parents/grandparents.
- Bridging the gap between different staff levels of expertise around early childhood care and education.
- To balance the work of this programme with our other work commitments and focus totally on the task at hand.
- Facilitating the parents as well as the children in the group.
- Workers knowing their boundaries and expected role in the group- it could be difficult for workers who had relatives attending.
- Implementing policies we had drawn up (for parents).
- Finding the balance between supporting families to take up services without imposing an authoritarian, judgemental attitude.
- Noting some of the children had some difficulties with some of their speech and finding a way to respond to it that didn't frighten parents.The interaction between the chldren highlighted to parents that children of the same age were at different developmental stages particularly in relation to speech and language. The group offered a space to parents to acknowledge this to themselves initially and then raise it with the team knowing they could look for support from outside agencies. This is another example of how trust was vital in this programme.
- Acknowledging that some of the families have literacy difficulties.

5 10 Steps Forward

This report lays out clearly the work required to design, develop and deliver "Our Gailles" and to embed, within the team, the organisation and the community at large, the huge significance that a positive experience of initial engagement with education can have for a child and their parents. In many ways, we sought to start the process of providing a space for young children and their families through the *Gailles* Programme. The result however, was that the Programme brought huge value to the organisation – way above and beyond our initial expectations. Thus, we have agreed the following as the next ten steps in mainstreaming the Programme:

1. Embed *Our Gailles* into the mainstream Resource Centre Programme;
2. Secure funding - through working with all funders - to ensure continuation of this programme;
3. Invest in additional equipment with additional funding;
4. Target parents who have not attended;
5. Promote parental participation in the sessions;
6. Development of Traveller Culture Awareness Programme to be made available to pre-schools in the county;
7. Development of a culturally appropriate storybook for use in other pre-schools;
8. Develop a system to track the progress of our participants through their education;
9. Additional training and development for staff;
10. Promotion of the Programme throughout the county.

Ultimately, a core organisational goal is to have on-site childcare available within the Southside Travellers Resource Centre within five years. The design, development and implementation of *Our Gailles* adds significant value to this goal, in that it embeds an awareness and understanding of the significance of early education and of the work needed to deliver on such an aim.