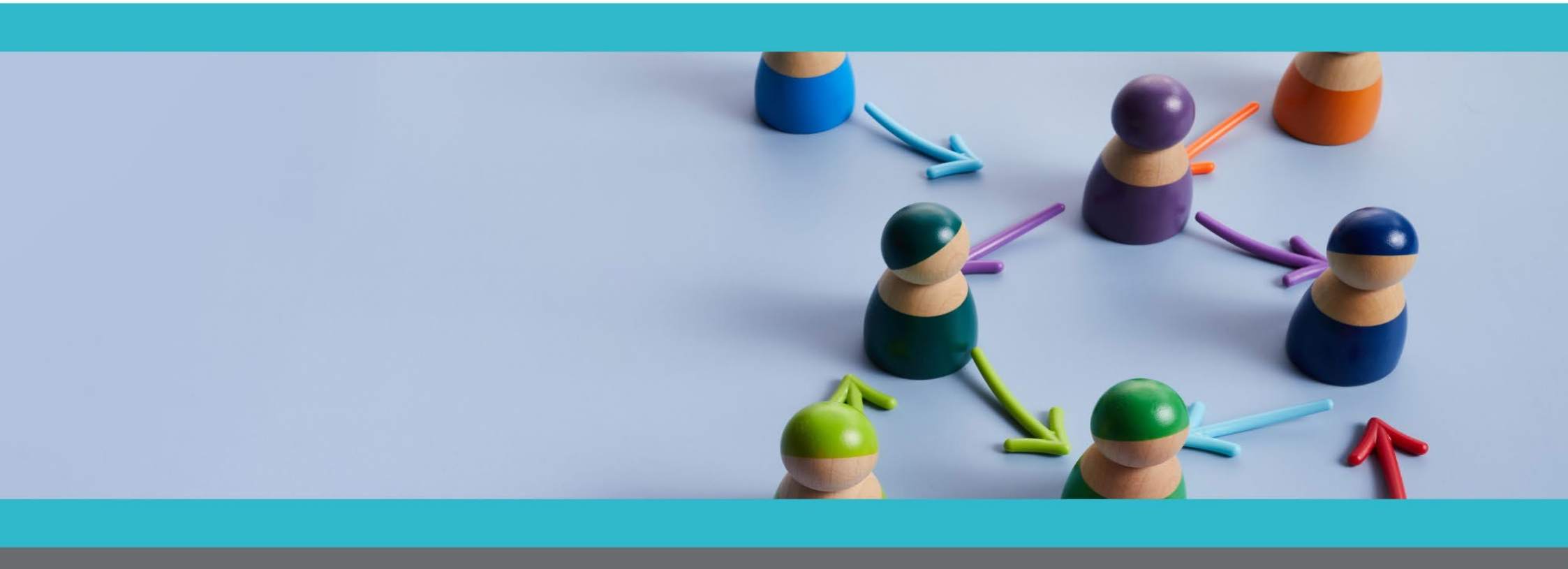


# Traveller Gatherings Engagement Report



## Foreword

I am delighted, in my capacity as Inequalities and Inclusion Co-ordinator in the SHSCT to share with you the Traveller Gathering or Voices Report (Minceri Thari) as many refer to.

This report was commissioned by the SHSCT and delivered in partnership with Travellers, Traveller support groups and range of stakeholders working with or supporting Travellers in the SHSCT area. Futurespark Consultancy headed up by Maire McGrath undertook this process supported by key stakeholders.

I would like to thank every person who participated in this process, attended “Gatherings”, workshops, made submissions or provided invaluable lived experiences to formulate this report highlighting key priorities for Travellers. A special thanks goes to Maire McGrath for her professionalism and realism using innovative approaches throughout this work.

Irish Traveller’s face multiple barriers across various dimensions within our society (Abdalla, 2010; Kennedy, 2023). This exclusion and oppression (Thompson, 2006) has wide-ranging effects on individuals, families and wider community. Traveller’s poor health and wellbeing outcomes and barriers to citizenship are well documented in reports and research (1994; CAWT, 2006; Abdalla et al., 2010; Kennedy et al., 2023). Despite this knowledge outcomes have not improved with issues hardening over time as a result of negative attitudes, discrimination and unrealistic portrayals of Traveller culture (Van Hout and Hearne, 2017).

With this in mind it is important to acknowledge the multi-generational impact of trauma and levels of inequalities and exclusion faced by Travellers. While many of the issues outlined in this report are not new, it highlights the need to reinvigorate efforts to redress the longstanding negative impact in social determinants of health.

Traveller Gatherings (Voices) echo’s the findings from numerous reports and research studies nationally and internationally. The most comprehensive is the All-Ireland Traveller Health Study (Abdalla, 2010) to O’Donnell (2017) or Kennedy (2023).

From a holistic perspective we recognise the multi-layered and multi-faceted interconnectedness of the social determinants of health and while we may not be able to directly change policy or delivery plans for other agencies and or organisations we can lobby, advocate and share ways to address concerns and priorities for the Traveller community.

Across and embedded in this approach and subsequent report are the principles and ethos of Relationship Based Practice and Anti-discriminatory approaches and promoting a Human Rights agenda.

The SHSCT is committed to providing high quality, safe, effective and accessible services for all. From this report an action plan is being developed which reflects the identified priority areas and themes as outlined in the Traveller Gatherings (voices) report. This report and its findings will be shared widely across all HSC services, statutory and community/voluntary organisations with an expectation that relevant strands of this reports effects change in service plans and delivery.

Robbie McCague

Inequalities and Inclusion co-ordinator – Promoting Wellbeing service SHSCT

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## Introduction

### The purpose of Traveller Gatherings engagement

The purpose of Traveller Gathering meetings, facilitated across Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT) communities in 2023, was to hear directly from local Traveller communities about their priorities for improving health and well-being in local Traveller communities. This engagement was undertaken with the objective of initiating and providing insights for the development of a three year Strategy aimed at advancing efforts to address health and social inequalities in collaboration with communities and stakeholders. This report captures themes from Traveller Gathering engagement in 2023 to reflect the priorities and key points Traveller community members shared in discussions about health, social care, and well-being.

### About our engagement

From June – September 2023, the SHSCT co-ordinated a series of five local Traveller Gathering meetings supported by an external, independent facilitator in Newry, Armagh, Banbridge, Craigavon and Dungannon. Facilitated Traveller Gathering meetings were attended by 26 community members (24 women and 2 men) spanning all ages. The SHSCT staff involved in promoting well-being and health visiting also facilitated outreach discussions with nine local families as part of community engagement. In total over 50 community members contributed to this community engagement.

In speaking with Traveller community members, the style of facilitation was extremely informal and conversational, focusing broadly on three areas:

- I. Understanding more about people's key concerns about health and well-being for their families/communities or barriers they have experienced in getting help.
- II. Learning about (from their own, families' or community experience) what services or support have been most helpful/useful for their health and well-being.
- III. Identifying what are the priority areas where they want to see change happen to improve health and well-being in Traveller communities over the next 3 years.

Time was also dedicated to facilitating conversations with local community and voluntary Traveller groups, including Armagh Traveller and Roma Support Group, Craigavon Traveller Support Committee, An Tearmannn/STEP NI, Toybox (an early childhood project working with Traveller and Roma communities) and SHSCT's specialist Health Visitor for Traveller Communities.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all SHSCT staff and community and voluntary sector colleagues as mentioned above who helped to organise, coordinate and took time to contribute to engagement discussions.

### What this report hopes to ignite

Pivotal national and local reports such as the *All-Ireland Traveller Health Study: Our Geels* in 2010 by UCD and *Cross Border Connections: A Report Considering Travellers' Access to Health in a Cross-Border Context* in 2006 by CAWT<sup>i</sup> on Traveller health and well-being have documented key health inequalities in Traveller communities.

As findings from local engagement captured in this report show, over twelve years on from the most comprehensive all-Ireland research on Traveller health, many of the key issues remain live. Such issues include:

- Timely access to mental health support and services.
- How family members in carer roles learn about and access support from statutory and community services.
- Difficulties getting registered with and securing GP appointments.
- Accessing occupational therapy, housing adaptations and social care help to support recovery and independence at home.
- The need for additional educational support and social connection for children and young people.
- Specific support and opportunities for women in communities to focus more on self-care.
- Tailoring services' communication, outreach and taking time to effectively connect with families/communities.
- A lack of understanding across different service providers and local communities of Traveller cultural traditions and the distinct identity of the Traveller community (racism and discrimination are still burning issues).
- Living conditions and sourcing appropriate accommodation in local areas.

Many of these issues have also been compounded by our collective experience of Covid. As highlighted for example in local discussions with parents and young people, it is only now the full impacts of Covid on young people's confidence and well-being are becoming clearer. Other issues such as trying to get a GP appointment is a source of frustration across all communities as another significant impact from Covid.

There are many areas which need development captured in this report. Some of these issues (such as housing and accommodation which are key social determinants of health and well-being) are historic, national, and systemic issues which will not be solved by a local three-year action plan. There is, undoubtedly, a clear role and need for local stakeholders and communities

to advocate and campaign on these issues with other regional lobbying movements and rights-based campaigns to address enduring health inequalities.

Having emerged from Covid with its resulting impacts on services (waiting lists etc.), now more than ever there is a need for services and projects to work together with Traveller communities to improve health and well-being support.

This report hopes to ignite collaborative planning discussions with services working with Traveller communities to prioritise key aims to work on which a three-year action plan can deliver and deliver well. As such, there is a need to be selective and realistic about what can be delivered in three years which will make a genuine and positive difference and ensure that Traveller communities will see and feel the impacts of in their everyday lives.

### Opportunities and potential to unlock in collaboration

Although many health and wellbeing issues were highlighted from our engagement, there was a deep-felt appreciation of strong relationships forged with and valued support received by families from dedicated SHSCT health and social care staff working closely with Traveller communities and community and voluntary sector partners who provide a wide range of different services and community development activities.

A vital part of our Traveller Gathering engagement also focused on hearing from SHSCT staff and community and voluntary sector partners working directly with families and communities. All favoured the opportunity to rethink and revitalise how local services and groups could collaborate and focus on a shared plan which aligns the work of local services more directly with what Traveller communities have identified as their priorities for improving health and well-being.



Opportunities for enhanced collaboration highlighted by services and community groups included:

- Learning more about what services and groups are offering and providing in terms of health and well-being for Traveller communities to identify where connections across service providers and sectors can be strengthened.
- Refreshing how the Traveller Action Group (TAG) works with more recognition of the role community and voluntary sector stakeholders can play as equal partners in development plans moving forward.
- Mapping the range of assets local services and groups have (skills, knowledge, expertise, relationships, resources etc.) across organisations and sectors that can be harnessed in new ways to support Traveller communities.
- Exploring the potential for joint work to support different community development approaches to support empowerment and participation in health and well-being initiatives.
- Working together to lever more resources for Traveller communities and collaborative work which supports health and wellbeing: a shared action plan was seen as key to this.

We have unpacked this in more detail in the final themed section of this report on developing collaboration. What is clear from engagement is that there is a positive openness and drive to work differently together for communities and that a future shared plan provided this opportunity.

## About this report

For our reporting on Gathering meetings, we have used the current Department of Health's *Making Life Better (2013 – 2023)* public health strategy framework. This framework centres on how policy and practice can influence the wide range of factors that shape healthy lives and choices.

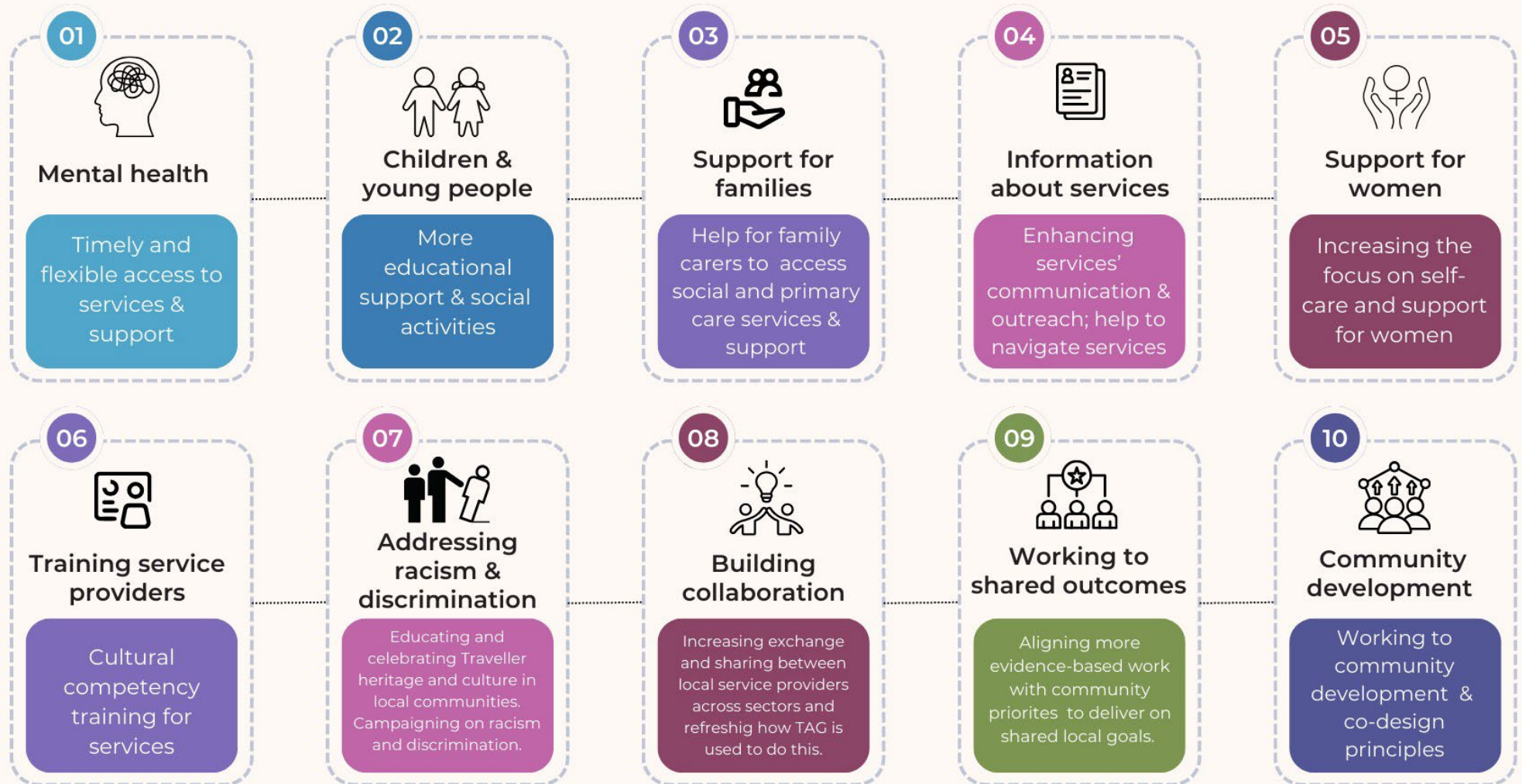
*Making Life Better* is not just about actions and programmes at government level, but also provides direction for work at both regional and local levels with public agencies, including local government, local communities, and others, working in partnership. We have therefore used this framework as it is used across sectors and its following six themes to capture points from engagement:

1. Giving every child the best start
2. Equipped throughout life
3. Empowering healthy living
4. Creating the conditions
5. Empowering communities
6. Developing collaboration

We have clustered key points/issues and suggested areas of development highlighted by participants under these six themes each of which is explained briefly in more detail in the report sections below.

Examples of other good practice projects mentioned from engagement with communities and stakeholders are listed in Appendix A. An 'at-a-glance' summary of Traveller Gatherings conversation topics and themes can be found in Appendix B. We have also referenced very recent and key research reports where relevant to engagement findings in Appendix C.

## An Infographic Summary of Key Themes from Engagement

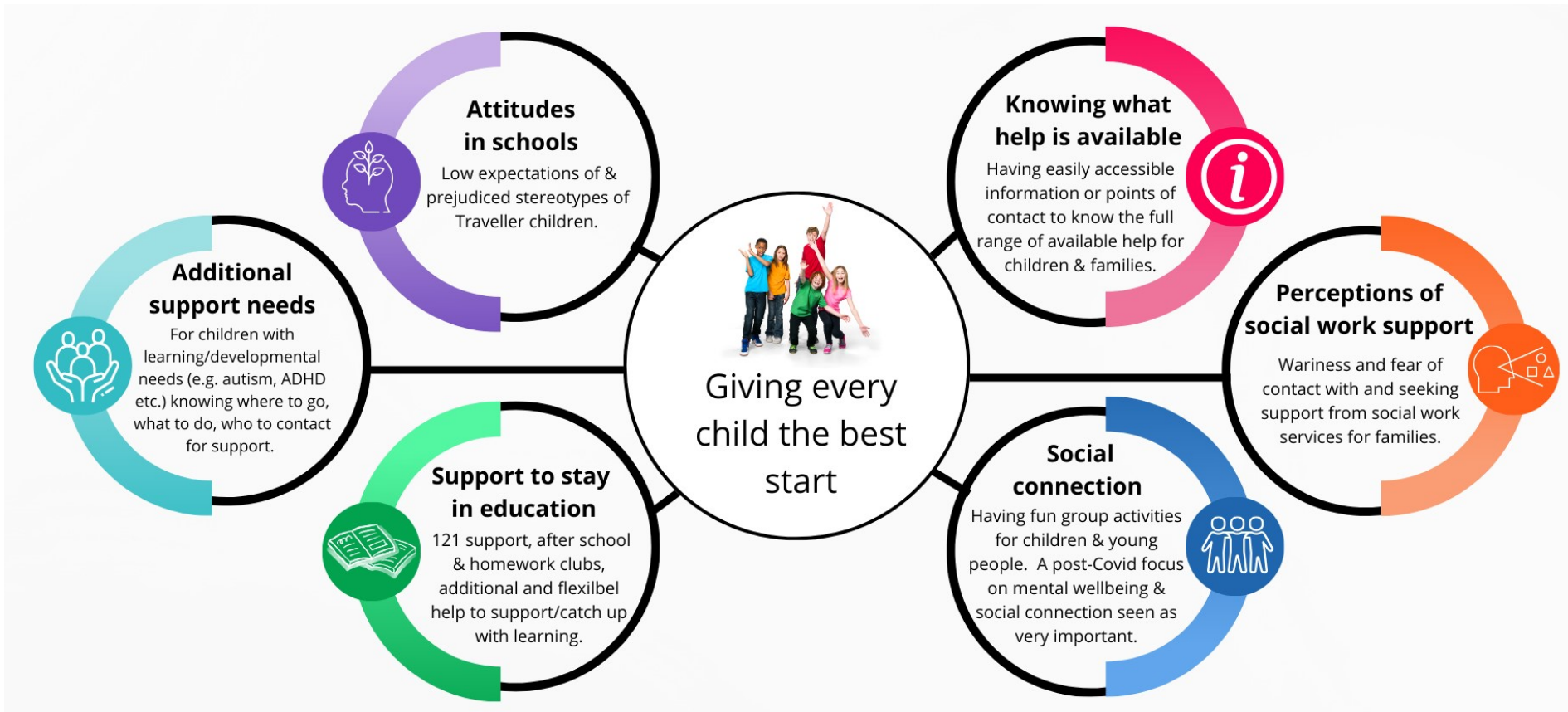




# 1. Giving Every Child the Best Start

- Parenting and family support
- Supporting children and young people to be skilled for life

Table 1: Key points summarised from Traveller Gatherings linked to this theme



### **1. Facilitating Traveller cultural awareness training for school and education support staff**

Throughout our Gatherings, various experiences were shared about the treatment of Traveller children in schools. There were still a lot of stereotypical assumptions made about Traveller children with expectations low as to what they could achieve in schooling. It was felt that there was very limited understanding of Travellers' lifestyle and culture in mainstream schooling. Individuals shared how discriminatory attitudes experienced by Traveller children in schooling could stay with and impact young people into their adult years. Having education professionals and support staff trained more in cultural awareness was identified as a need.

### **2. More signposting and service information for parents and families**

Parents would appreciate more information/support on where to go and who to contact to establish if their child/young person needs additional support (e.g., for autism, ADHD, learning difficulties etc.). Families who had received help from family support services and projects really valued this assistance. How information is given and relayed to families on support for children could be made more accessible to explain the current range of services and support available so they are aware of who to contact for what and how services work. Understanding how assessment and support services worked to help parents and children with additional support needs was seen as an area to develop.

### **3. Providing additional in-school and after-school support with learning**

Homework and afterschool clubs were viewed as very positive support to help and encourage children and young people in their learning and education. Examples were shared where teachers or other education support staff had provided additional one-to-one support for Traveller children with reading etc. which was highly rated. Also highlighted was the need to think about how more flexible, additional educational support could be enhanced for nomadic families.

### **4. Working to change perceptions of social work services in communities**

Across the board, the fear of social work services in Traveller communities was highlighted. Social work involvement with families was predominantly seen as negative with the assumption that children might be taken away as a result of contact with social workers. How the role of social work could be reframed and communicated to be seen as another way of accessing support for children and families was highlighted as an area of focus.

### **5. Creating opportunities which help children's social connection and mental wellbeing**

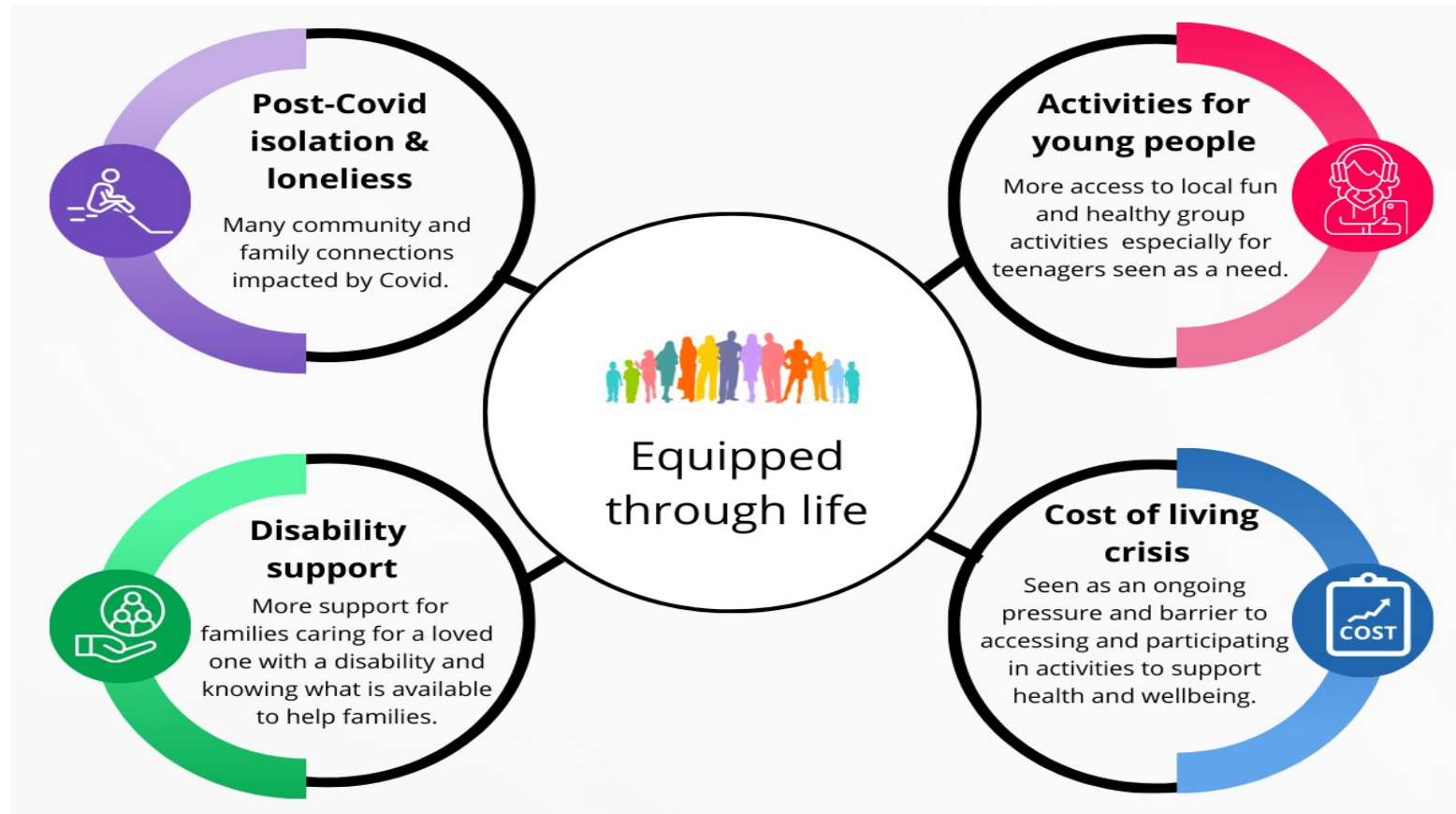
The impact of Covid on children's social connections, confidence and general mental wellbeing was emphasized. During Covid, many social relationships and contacts were broken. Families shared examples of children and young people becoming more withdrawn and less socially confident as a result. More fun after-school social group activities for children were highlighted as a welcome future focus to address the impact of Covid on children and young people. It was also highlighted that other practical issues (such as cost and transport considerations) needed to be factored into organising these activities to ensure they were accessible by all.



## 2. Equipped Through Life

- Supporting young people to get equipped for adult life
- Employment education and lifelong learning
- Participation in social, cultural, sports and leisure activities
- Healthy active ageing

Table 2: Key points summarised from Traveller Gatherings linked to this theme



### **1. Continuing advice and practical help to access financial support**

The cost-of-living crisis was cited as a big issue for communities. Practical help in understanding, applying for and securing benefits was seen as a priority area of valued support. Transport and cost were identified for some families as a barrier to accessing the activities which would support health and wellbeing (going to leisure centres, doing outdoor pursuits etc.).

Continuing support on navigating welfare systems and filling forms were seen as vital support services continually needed across local areas.

### **2. Creating opportunities for social reconnection in communities**

The impact of Covid on family and community social connections was emphasized as having a big impact on health and wellbeing. Support and activities for older people living alone who may have lost social connections during Covid were also flagged as an issue for attention. To have more social opportunities which would bring community members together more was seen as a positive step to address loneliness and isolation.

### **3. Hosting more group activities for young people**

Social connection, confidence building and getting out to do healthy activities were seen as needed supports for teenagers especially also linking to the negative impacts of Covid. Families have seen more social anxiety and mental health issues emerging in young people. Increasing and developing more after-school youth group activities was favoured as a way of building



friendships, learning new skills, and getting a taste of different interests they could develop further (e.g., sports, outdoor pursuits, trips away and creative activities/classes).

#### **4. Targeting carer support to families**

Families caring for another family member and especially families caring for a family member with a disability, need to be made aware of and reassured about carer support. Some concerns were expressed about trusting in/taking respite breaks. More work could be undertaken with family members as lead carers to explore how they can be helped more in caring roles and accessing appropriate respite support.

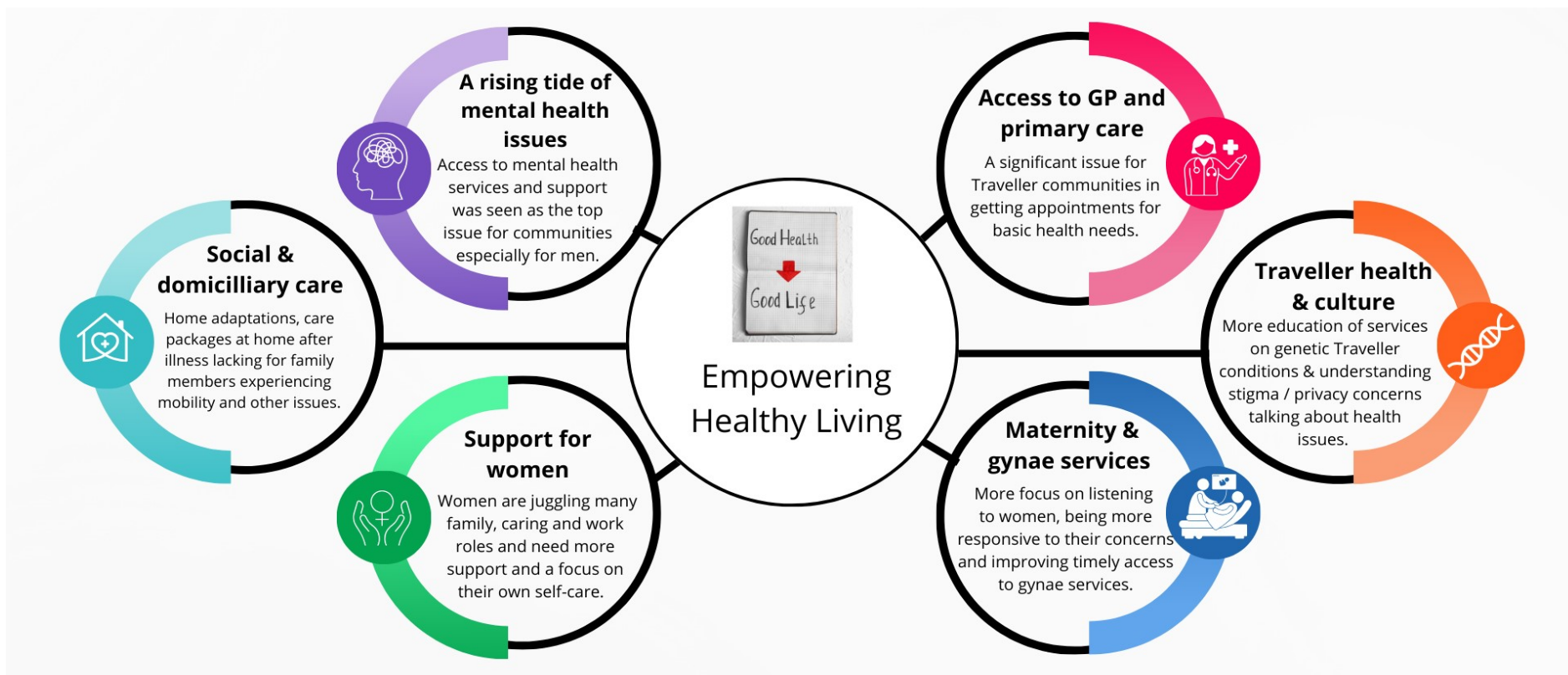
Carer support needs as a wider issue (e.g., there were other examples of families supporting loved ones with a range of other conditions/illnesses) should be explored in communities as a part of planning.



### 3. Empowering Healthy Living

- Encouraging healthy behaviours
- Health screening and prevention programmes
- Improved mental health and wellbeing
- Ensuring people are empowered to make healthy life choices for self-care with access to good health information

Table 3: Key points summarised from Traveller Gatherings linked to this theme



**1. Increasing mental health support and service access for communities wanting skills to help others in this section**

Addressing the growing levels of mental health issues, especially for men and young people, was the top concern shared in our engagement. Increasing levels of mental illness and suicide are now well-evidenced and documented as a huge issue in Traveller communities. The *All-Ireland Traveller Health Study* research in 2010<sup>ii</sup> evidenced that the Traveller suicide rate is six times higher for women and seven times higher for men when compared to the general population. Recognising and trying to seek help for mental health issues was cited as the most urgent health need to address for communities in a plan.

Given the levels of stigma surrounding mental health issues, how appropriate mental health support could be delivered for Traveller communities was considered incredibly important. Discretion, privacy, and timely and flexible access were highlighted as key factors in improving mental health support to communities. There was also a keen interest in building peer skills in communities of how to talk with a friend or family member who was struggling with their mental health and feel equipped with information to know where to go to get help.

During our engagement work, a research study *Inequalities in Mental Health Care for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller Communities – Identifying Best Practice* was published in September 2023<sup>iii</sup> by the NHS Race and Health Observatory. Many of the key recommendations in this study of how mental health services should be delivered mirror many points highlighted from our engagement, namely:

- The fact that waiting lists and digital access to mental health support do not fit the needs of many Traveller communities.
- The importance of creating ‘drop-in’ services which are highly valued by community members. These services were not badged as mental health services but did deal with a wide range of problems from mental health.

- The importance of co-producing mental health support with Traveller communities to create accessible and appropriate support.
- The need to focus on systemic community barriers of shame in talking about mental health.
- Too much information about mental health is not in a format which helps anyone with lower literacy skills to understand. Services need to develop different ways to get mental health information to communities.
- The need for mental health professionals to be trained and culturally competent for work with Traveller communities.

Also, at the time of producing this report, Craigavon Travellers Support Group had recently launched a local counselling service for Traveller communities. Mental health awareness and access to support and services should be a central focus of development moving forward.

## **2. Improving access to GPs and other primary care services**

*'Getting to see the doctor is so hard. People want to know all your business before you speak to the doctor, I can't be bothered sometimes telling them, so I don't get an appointment. It's OK to say what's wrong with the child, but it just doesn't feel right saying what's wrong with me, so I just leave it.'* – comment from engagement participant

This was the second most talked about issue after mental health. A very disempowering aspect of accessing basic healthcare was how difficult it was to get a GP appointment locally. In addition to having to repeatedly phone, even in clinics where you could walk in, there was a perception of little privacy or regard for privacy as individuals had to explain to administrative staff first why they wanted an appointment. There was also frustration expressed about the difficulty in securing dental appointments.

It was also felt that there was limited knowledge of other services at a primary care level (i.e. GP surgeries offering direct multi-disciplinary team (MDT) access to mental health, social work, and occupational therapy professionals) and that there also needed to be more awareness-raising on MDT support at local levels.

Sharing personal private information is a very sensitive issue in Traveller communities and many people find this very hard to do when speaking with GP receptionists or administrators on the phone which they must do to get time with a GP. These appointment barriers made it very difficult for people to talk about their health in order just to get an appointment.

Given the difficulties of accessing GP appointments and waiting times to be seen, some families highlighted how this resulted in them seeking private healthcare for initial tests and assessments. Opening up GPs again with easier access to appointments was viewed as a top priority moving forward.

### **3. More training of health professionals in Traveller health issues**

It was flagged that health professionals should be encouraged to ask someone if they are a Traveller to ensure that specific and genetic health issues are identified or considered. It was also recommended that healthcare professionals could benefit from training in this area.

The *Scoping Review on Physical Health Conditions in Irish Travellers*, recent research by Trinity College Dublin published in August 2023<sup>iv</sup> echoes this recommendation. There are specific genetic conditions Travellers can experience as a distinct ethnic population group. Research evidenced that Irish Traveller communities also experience other disproportionate physical health conditions (e.g., asthma, bronchitis, metabolic syndrome) at rates 2-3 times higher compared with the general population. Health disparities left researchers in no doubt that specific health awareness training would benefit health professionals:

*‘Irish Travellers experience a disproportionate burden of physical health conditions compared with background populations. Healthcare providers need to be aware of the unique physical health burden experienced by many Irish Travellers. Multifaceted strategies are needed to improve the health profile of this vulnerable and marginalised group (Scoping Review, 2023).*

#### **4. Enabling more self-care support for women**

The impact of Covid on families was referenced numerous times in engagement. It was felt that women had carried much of the practical caring and emotional support during and post-Covid in communities but did not take enough time for their self-care. Examples of local group activities, young mothers and women’s groups were shared which women had enjoyed and valued. Creating spaces for women to take time out, recharge and enjoy healthy self-care activities (supported where possible with childcare) to support their well-being was seen as very important.

#### **5. Supporting families to be aware of and how to access social care support**

Families shared experiences of needing help at home due to changes in health or recovery from illness. In addition to home adaptation support (this theme is unpacked in more detail in the next report section), there was limited understanding of different services which can support recovery at home (e.g., the role of occupational therapy, domiciliary social care, carer support etc.).

## **6. Working with maternity and gynaecology services**

Linked also to the above point on genetic Traveller conditions and considerations, it was felt that maternity and gynaecological care and treatment for Traveller women could be enhanced. Long waiting lists, better examination, screening, assessment and listening to women more were all cited as areas for development.

## **7. Changing the delivery format of health and wellbeing programmes**

Preventative and educational health programmes (e.g., such as supporting parents, child development, healthy lifestyles, mental wellbeing etc.) were welcomed. However, the delivery structure of these programmes (i.e., some being delivered over several weeks at set times with a minimum number of participants) could be reconsidered to be more flexible as it was difficult to get people in Traveller communities to commit to longer programmes at set times due to lifestyles, availability, and other pressures.

## **8. Recognising sensitivities in Traveller communities when talking about health**

Privacy and trust are two prime factors shaping how open communities are in connecting with others on health and well-being. Cultural dynamics in communities were highlighted as important for services to be aware of in developing plans. It was shared that there can be shame felt about having health conditions in Traveller communities. People are also very private about their health conditions which can make community discussions about health difficult. It was also emphasised that for some community members, illness or conditions were even seen as a sign of weakness or could lead to people feeling 'lesser' in the eyes of others.

Whether due to a deep sense of privacy or a feeling of stigma, people can hide their struggles or health issues from others and even family members. People could feel very self-conscious about how things look to others in managing their health (e.g., not wanting to wear glasses or hearing aids were some of the examples shared).

It was stressed that these dynamics needed to be understood by outside services. Being sensitive to and finding ways to encourage and destigmatise conversations about both physical and mental health issues with families/communities was seen as an important factor in planning for health and wellbeing.

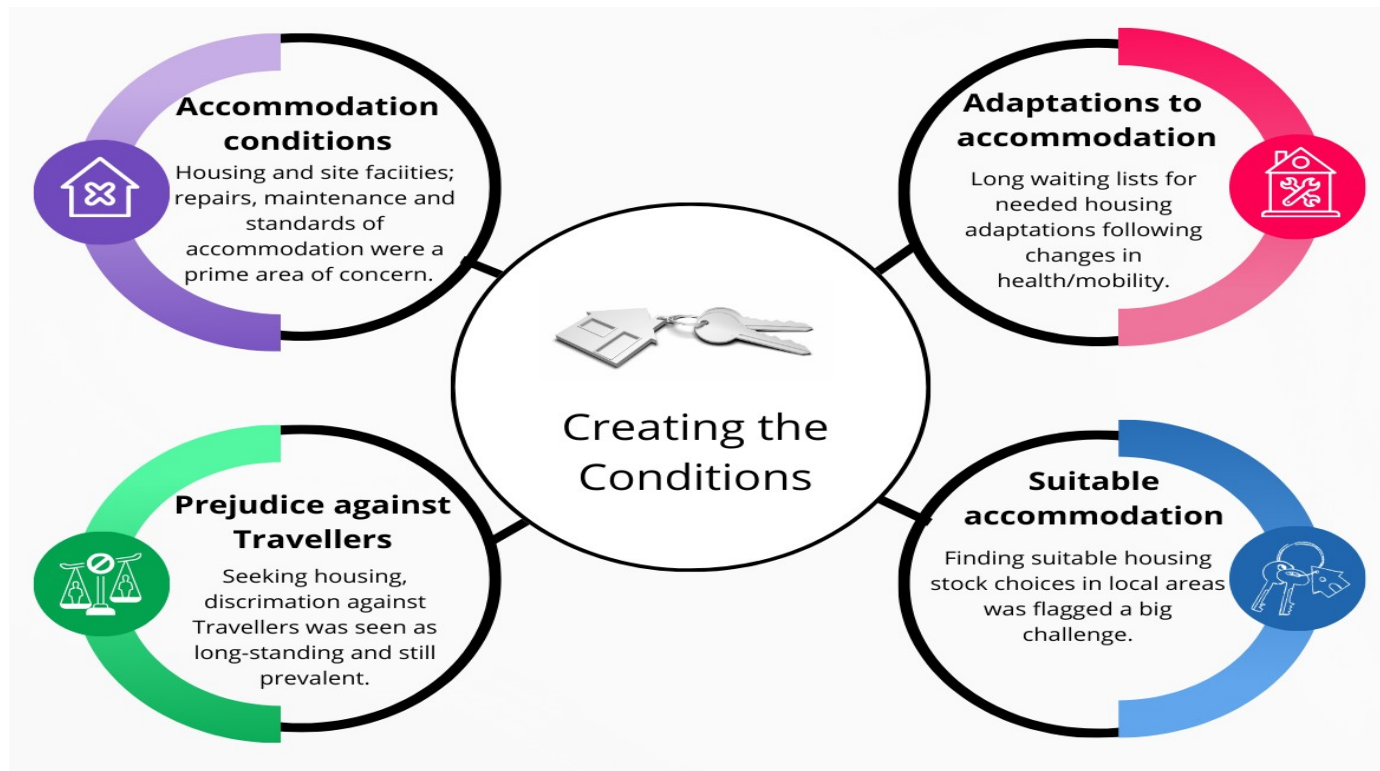




## 4. Creating the Conditions

- Having a decent standard of living
- Making the most of the physical environment
- Safe and healthy homes

Table 4: Key points summarised from Traveller Gatherings linked to this theme



### 1. Improving current accommodation standards

*'I've no choice but to live here, the kids and the older ones can't be living on the side of the road, the sites are bad, if they were good that's where I'd be...water and electric, toilets and showers that's what we need, and more sites.'* – comment from engagement participant

Housing has been one of the most significant issues impacting the health and well-being of Traveller communities. This is best summarised below from Trinity College's recent scoping review in 2023 on physical health conditions:

*'The importance of using a social determinants approach linking inequalities in healthcare, accommodation, and other factors such as racism and discrimination to poor health is advocated. With over 39% of Travellers estimated to be homeless, this negatively impacts overall health and well-being and compounds health inequalities.'*

From engagement, the external environment and facilities on sites, housing repair needs, and unsuitable accommodation facilities for individual/family needs were all flagged as key concerns.

It is recognised that this is not a local but a systemic national issue for all Traveller communities spanning many decades.

Collective local campaigning and advocacy for radically improved accommodation standards should feature as an aspect of planning. Given this, work on accommodation and housing as fundamental health and well-being determinants will need to be further refined involving a range of stakeholders and Traveller communities as to what can be practically achieved locally within a short three-year period.

## **2. Reviewing home adaptation needs in local communities**

From engagement, examples were shared whereby following acute care treatment in the hospital, much-needed home adaptations to support recovery and changed capacity/mobility (i.e., such as having a walk-in shower) were simply not made. Many families shared stories of waiting for years on the most basic home adaptations and most were still waiting on these changes. This was a common recurring theme in discussions. The risk of injury to older people from poor / poorly adapted housing was also cited as a noted factor by the All-Ireland Traveller Health Study.

There was also a varied understanding of the role of occupational therapy and how it could support recovery and practical changes needed in homes to support continued independent living. A strategic focus moving forward could be how multi-agency efforts are harnessed to identify families who have been waiting for this type of home support.

## **3. Advocating for more appropriate local housing choices**

*'There are problems in our community like there are in others; drinking and drugs don't help with the feuds as some people can't think straight and just don't care who gets hurt. It's always the women and children who end up the worst, moving house and school starting again.'*

*'Regarding housing rights, our Irish heritage is brushed away. We have had enough of being gaslighted and our feelings invalidated.'* – comments from engagement participants

Finding new accommodation after major life changes and splits in family dynamics (e.g., suddenly becoming homeless, having to relocate to a new area, finding accommodation after relationship breakdowns or domestic abuse etc.) were highlighted as some of the most stressful experiences impacting acutely on both physical and mental health.

The type of accommodation normally offered locally was considered limited and not appropriate for Traveller communities seeking new housing (either due to their size, condition, location, types of neighbourhoods etc.). The range of local housing stock was seen as an issue. Examples were shared whereby family members had to relocate back to live with their parents leading to overcrowding due to the lack of locally available accommodation alternatives.

More holistic support for women who had experienced a relationship breakdown and required urgent action to find accommodation as a result was also highlighted. Women in this situation could also experience marginalisation and feeling shunned because of family breakdown in their communities. Emotional and mental health support was also seen as part of the holistic support required to help women facing these challenges.

From Travellers' experiences shared of engaging with housing services, the need to challenge Traveller discrimination in services and rights advocacy were also seen as core support needs in securing safe and appropriate accommodation.



## 5. Empowering Communities

- Thriving communities – opportunities for people to connect socially
- Applying a community development approach to empower communities
- Safe communities
- Safe and healthy workplaces

**Table 5: Key points summarised from Traveller Gatherings linked to this theme**



### 1. Developing approaches and campaigns to tackle racism and discrimination

*'I've been called a gypo, knacker and tinker all my life and now my children hear the same.'*

*'The fact that we still as Traveller communities experience discrimination, and stigma and do not feel heard also is not fully appreciated to the extent we experience it in our everyday lives.'*

*'We understand and support the need for equality in other communities such as #BlackLivesMatter but when will you ever see a campaign for example, such as #TravellerLivesMatter?' - comments from engagement participants*

Prejudice, stereotyping, and blatant racism were experienced regularly by all Travellers across sectors, services, and communities. The intense feelings of marginalisation and pain experienced, as a result, were also firmly linked as a key factor by community members to rising rates of mental ill-health.

Under the Race Relations Order (1997), the Traveller community is specifically identified as a racial group which is protected against unlawful racial discrimination. The unrelenting levels of racism and discrimination experienced by Traveller communities featured strongly in all engagement discussions. We have previously referenced the need for much more widespread cultural awareness and competency training of services (e.g., education, housing and health and social care) but this also extends across sectors and local communities where there are Traveller populations

Given Travellers' experiences, there is a stark need to go further than increasing cultural awareness and competency training for service providers. Common-held stereotypes of Travellers stubbornly persist in our wider local communities. This requires not just training but other specific measures to educate wider communities to recognise Travellers as a protected ethnic group.

Rather than feeling invisible and being airbrushed out of shared local history, Traveller communities' rich culture and heritage need also to be celebrated and given their rightful place. This is integral to progressing social inclusion. Serious consideration of local communication campaigns or initiatives targeted at wider communities should be core to addressing deep-rooted prejudices and social exclusion.

## **2. Enhancing community development approaches and outreach**

It was recognised that building strong relationships with Traveller communities required time and consistency of staff to build levels of trust. Where great examples of service delivery were shared, the non-judgemental approach, respect for and time taken by staff to get to know individuals/families were always central to, noted and praised by community members.

It was also felt that there could be more direct outreach and engagement by statutory services aligning with community development principles and approaches. Given the long experience of community and voluntary organisations working with communities, exploring more about successful community development initiatives could be a rich source of learning to share with other local stakeholders.

### **3. Educating the wider community about Traveller history and culture**

*'We have a heritage and a long history in Ireland and our Traveller rights should be recognised.'* – comment from engagement participant

The need for myth-busting about Traveller culture and education on Traveller history and heritage in local communities was seen as a focus for future planning. Traveller culture and the richness of Traveller heritage never or rarely feature in wider community education or community learning.

CAWT's *Cross Border Connections* report on Traveller health referenced earlier highlights that 'community development approaches lead to more sustainable health outcomes, more positive relationships and improved communication.' Creating different types of connections and relationships between Traveller communities and wider communities should feature as a vital part of action planning and work on social inclusion. Having talks and learning exchanges in schools about Traveller heritage was seen as a good starting point in addition to connecting with other groups in the community.

### **4. Connecting communities and celebrating Traveller culture**

We have already referenced the need expressed for more opportunities for social connection in Traveller communities. Linked to this it was also suggested that there could be more events to bring together communities and celebrate Traveller history, culture, and achievements.

Sharing and promoting projects from NI Traveller communities connecting out to other Traveller communities and areas was also seen as an area for future development.



## 5. Continuing to build on local rights and advocacy work

*'You get so tired of justifying yourself as a Traveller.'*

*'Do we need to always give up our own identity and to be able to live in our own cultural ways versus trying to be modern? Support to communities should be helping us but sometimes it does not work how we want it to work.'* – comments from engagement participants

Ensuring that communities were aware of and confident to exercise their rights was seen as vital community development work to be continued. Younger Travellers especially felt this was important to build up confidence and pride in their identity. Again, the need to shatter tired images and stereotypes of Travellers (i.e. such as My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding) was a talking point for younger Travellers. A core aspect of this work (aligning with the fundamentals of community development) is how communities are supported to build rights-based and advocacy skills within communities.

Rights and advocacy approaches require a twin-track approach with more human rights training highlighted as equally important for those delivering services with statutory obligations and working closely with marginalised communities.

There is a range of resources and training which have been developed by groups and organisations which would benefit from mapping to identify with local communities and stakeholders where great rights and advocacy project work can be further developed or delivered more widely.



# 6. Developing Collaboration

- Strengthening collaboration for health and wellbeing
- Building on communities' strengths and developing partnerships to improve health and well-being

Table 6: Key points summarised from Traveller Gatherings and stakeholder conversations linked to this theme



## Developing Collaboration – Areas Highlighted for Development

It is important to note that areas highlighted on developing collaboration emerged largely from conversations with a selection of professionals closely supporting local Traveller communities from both the statutory and community and voluntary (C&V) sectors.

### **1. Ensuring the transfer of health information across services and boundaries**

The need to repeat health histories and the lack of shared access to health information by professionals across health and social care services in different geographical areas was frustrating for many families. This was especially pertinent for nomadic families who found major gaps in the health information shared across services/regions.

The introduction of the new Encompass medical records systems in NI will address aspects of sharing health information but is a collaborative issue to consider for families travelling between NI, ROI, and other parts of the UK.

### **2. Facilitating a more evidence-based approach to local planning for communities**

A welcome move in future planning would be to identify and share more statistics and data about Traveller communities, local work, and service/project uptake and to monitor trends/changes in community needs and gauging outcomes. It was highlighted that having joined-up discussions which were more evidence-based would support more focused collaboration across services and groups.

### **3. Exploring with communities their desired levels of involvement in collaboration and planning**

The need to rethink collectively from a PPI (personal and public involvement) perspective how this strategic work stays Traveller-led was highlighted. It was flagged that all services needed to be realistic about how this can be done meaningfully and in a way which works for Traveller communities. More traditional PPI models of engagement (e.g., community representatives attending set service planning meetings etc.) were not seen to be suitable models for joint work with communities.

A key step in finalising plan goals and actions will be to link with communities and relevant stakeholders about how they want to be involved and what needs to be in place to support this.

It is envisaged that this new approach and the findings directly from communities and stakeholders will be able to shape and set achievable objectives in moving forward some of these longstanding and core issues. It is recognised that for people involved in PPI or sharing lived experiences to improve services, serious consideration on remuneration is required.

### **4. Developing outreach approaches into communities about services and support**

Building relationships of trust and taking time to do this with good communication was seen as an essential factor in how services work well with communities. How services can develop more joined-up communication about what is locally available and communicate this in different formats and ways (factoring in varying levels of literacy in communities) was suggested as a focus for collaboration.

## **5. Revisiting how the Traveller Action Group (TAG) could support collaborative work and exchange across sectors**

It was highlighted that learning, discussion and debate on development work and connections across services could be given more time and be done in a way which facilitates more in-depth and meaningful exchanges across sectors. It was suggested that TAG forum meetings could be reviewed by all TAG participants and refreshed to enhance collaboration and communication in moving strategic work forward. The potential for TAG to connect stakeholders to collectively lobby for action on priorities for local Traveller communities was also highlighted.

## **6. Facilitating more involvement of and learning from C&V sector partners**

Community and voluntary partners play a leading role in providing practical grassroots support and innovating projects in their work with local communities. It was felt that collaborative dynamics across sectors could shift to recognise more of what the C&V sector brings in terms of experience, knowledge and community development approaches seeing them more as equal strategic partners in shaping development.

## **7. Using a strategic plan to rethink key performance indicators aligned with outcomes**

A Traveller-led strategy working on key issues prioritised by communities was welcomed as a fresh opportunity for collaborative delivery. It was also seen as an opportunity to identify broader outcomes-based measures of success which could be flexibly translated into more diverse key performance indicators services/projects aligned with communities' realities and needs.

To support more strategic joined-up delivery for Traveller communities, future service-level agreements (SLAs) with community and voluntary sector and other funded partners, a new plan presented the opportunity to:

- Adopt a more flexible, outcomes-based approach to setting KPIs with delivery partners and connect these to the strategy being developed.
- Consider how more strategic and collaborative work could be incentivised and factor into SLAs for community delivery partners.
- Reflect more of an assets-based approach tapping more into delivery partners' strengths and specialisms to provide the best support to communities.

### **8. Mapping local resources, strengths and assets working with Traveller communities**

Developing a strategic plan to work on health inequalities presented another opportunity to understand fully what assets are available across local services and projects to support Traveller communities (skills, knowledge, expertise, service activities/projects, resources, good practice, what is working well already etc.). Mapping these different strengths and assets was a recommended process step in developing/delivering a strategy. Having this knowledge would also support the potential for more sharing, referrals and collaboration across services, groups, and sectors.

### **9. Promoting local learning from good practice models, and investing in community development**

Learning about good practice from other areas of Ireland and the UK was valued by many local groups connecting with other projects in other areas of Ireland and the UK. The need for caution about transferring models from a community development viewpoint was emphasized. The point was also reiterated in engagement that we also need to recognise and share good practice models developed organically in NI.

In other areas, many models of good practice have emerged as a result of targeted resourcing and support channelled into communities over a long period. Developing new innovative practices (e.g., such as peer support models or community empowerment approaches) also needs to factor in current levels of community infrastructure etc. Not doing so and taking a 'cut and paste' approach to good practice models from other areas brings risks.

Transferring models of good practice need to 'meet people where they are at' in terms of community development. What may work well in one locale may not work well in another because the types of community support, community dynamics and infrastructure are very different.

It was highlighted that levels of capacity and empowerment varied across NI Traveller communities and areas. Linked to the mapping suggestion above, ascertaining where community development investment is most needed was seen as a collaborative planning focus.

We have also collated from engagement good practice projects from other regions which were referenced by communities/stakeholders. More details on these can be found in Appendix A at the end of this report.

## Concluding Comments

For professionals and organisations working closely with Traveller communities, there will be no surprises about health and well-being issues highlighted in this report. Many of these wider social determinants of health (such as housing) are historic and deep-rooted for Traveller communities who have experienced significant discrimination and marginalisation. Regional systemic issues such as these pose a big challenge for local stakeholders to navigate to deliver impactful local change. This report aims to provide local services and projects with a range of developmental areas to refine, prioritise and craft into a local action plan.

The concept of a local Traveller-informed strategy was however seen by key stakeholders as a great opportunity to revitalise local collaboration and to focus on delivering on shared local goals and actions which are more aligned with the everyday realities and needs of Traveller communities.

Three years is a short time. To maintain the trust of communities, this strategic planning process will need to ensure that it delivers impact and change that communities can see and benefit from on the ground. There are many suggestions for development which can be worked on together to make a real difference within this timeframe. What is clear from engagement is that there are dedicated professionals across sectors who are invested in harnessing local skills, knowledge, and resources to work together to deliver the best for local Traveller communities. This is a strong platform to build on in developing a new Traveller-informed plan.

A vital next step for SHSCT working with communities and stakeholders is now to develop an inclusive process for refining goals and actions to improve health and well-being support from the areas for development highlighted from engagement.



## Appendix A: Some examples of good practice highlighted by stakeholders

### **Health Champions community training model**

#### **Friends, Family and Travellers in partnership with the Royal Society for Public Health Training**

A project facilitating Gypsy, Roma, Traveller, and nomadic community members to be trained to become Health Champions and provided with resources and training to cascade health and well-being knowledge to their family and wider community.

For more information, [click this website link](#)

### **Identifying good practice in Traveller mental health projects report (UK)**

#### **NHS Race and Health Observatory**

For more information, [click this website link](#)

### **National Mental Health Traveller Network (Ireland)**

A collaborative regional Traveller-led network approach to discuss and explore culturally appropriate mental health support and resources for Traveller communities.

For more information, [click this website link](#)

### **Supporting Traveller Carers**

#### **MECOPP (Minority Ethnic Carer of Older People) in partnership with PVKAS (Scotland)**

MECOPP run a Gypsy/Traveller Carers' Project and they work in rural and urban areas of Scotland.

For more information, [click this website link](#)

### **Clare Traveller Community Development Project (Ireland)**

Established in 2021 the Clare Traveller Community Development Project is a collaborative approach, currently hosted by Clare LDC, with the ambition of creating an independent Traveller-led community development project.

For more information, [click this website link](#)

### **Traveller rights awareness and campaigning**

#### **Participation and Practice of Rights (PPR) NI in partnership with the Galway Traveller Movement**

Under the guidance of PPR NI, this campaigning work was developed to empower communities with others to achieve change and progress a human rights-based approach for Travellers. The PPR approach aims to make government and decision-making structures more accountable and participative.

For more information, [click on this website link](#)

### **Online diversity-aware training and resources for organisations**

#### **Donegal Traveller Project**

An eight-part online training programme will take organisations and businesses through the key elements of becoming Diversity Aware.

For more information, [click this website link](#)

### **Traveller heritage education, promotion, and celebration**

Pavee Point has developed and produced a wide range of resources and projects celebrating Traveller culture and identity.

For more information, [click on this website link](#)

## Appendix B: A Summary of Topics and Themes from Traveller Gatherings Engagement Discussions

<b>Giving Every Child the Best Start</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Learning support in schools</li> <li>◆ Support for parents (additional needs assessment: e.g. ADHD, autism etc)</li> <li>◆ Knowing where to go to access additional support</li> <li>◆ Traveller culture – educating educators to address prejudice.</li> </ul>
<b>Equipped Through Life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Developmental and social activities for children and young people</li> <li>◆ After-school activities</li> <li>◆ Support for social connection and mental well-being</li> <li>◆ Cost-of-living crisis impacts on accessing classes/activities/facilities</li> <li>◆ Supporting access to work/further learning pathways for young people.</li> </ul>
<b>Empowering Healthy Living</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Mental health support – counselling, peer models of support, family support and assistance, support for men, crisis support</li> <li>◆ Developing different models of health prevention programmes</li> <li>◆ Access to primary care services such as GPs, dentists etc.: getting appointments and getting registered.</li> <li>◆ Knowledge and navigation of service (e.g., MDT teams, OT roles etc.)</li> <li>◆ Service outreach into communities</li> <li>◆ Medical records transfer across systems (Trust areas and regions)</li> <li>◆ Specific support and focus on women health's and well-being</li> <li>◆ Carer support (e.g. respite assistance).</li> </ul>
<b>Creating the Conditions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Housing access</li> <li>◆ Crisis accommodation support (e.g., appropriate family accommodation for rehousing when there are changes to family circumstances)</li> <li>◆ Types of appropriate housing</li> <li>◆ Housing adaptation (e.g., to support changes in health/mobility)</li> <li>◆ Site facilities and external environment to support health and wellbeing</li> <li>◆ Workplace experiences.</li> </ul>
<b>Empowering Communities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Campaigns and education on Traveller culture #TravellerLivesMatter</li> <li>◆ Peer model development</li> <li>◆ Human rights focus</li> <li>◆ Work with services/communities in addressing systemic racism and discrimination</li> <li>◆ How service and community support information is provided to communities</li> <li>◆ How services work to engage and co-produce actions with communities.</li> </ul>
<b>Developing Collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Funder models and approaches aligning to communities' priorities</li> <li>◆ Supporting empowerment approaches and ways of working with Traveller communities</li> <li>◆ Developing more collaboration</li> <li>◆ Connecting to facilitated direct community outreach</li> <li>◆ Learning from other regional good practice models (e.g. ROI) and promoting</li> <li>◆ Promoting local good practice to other regions</li> <li>◆ Working with a more outcome and evidence-based focus.</li> </ul>

## Appendix C: References

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- <sup>i</sup> University College Dublin. All Ireland Traveller Health Study: Our Geels, Summary of Findings. All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team. Dublin, 2010.
  - <sup>ii</sup> Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT): Cross Border Connections: A Report Considering Travellers' Access to Health in a Cross-Border Context. NI, 2006.
  - <sup>iii</sup> NHS Race and Health Observatory. Inequalities in Mental Health Care for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller Communities – Identifying Best Practice. UK, 2023.
  - <sup>iv</sup> Trinity College Dublin, Kennedy F, Ward A, Mockler D, *et al*/ Scoping review on Physical Health Conditions in Irish Travellers (Mincéiri), BMJ Open 2023.