The Roma Project: A Case Study of Community Service

Brian Horgan

Summary: The criminal justice system has a responsibility to address offending behaviour in a manner that is sensitive to the offenders’ culture, identifies the special characteristics of their offences and also addresses their unique needs. In Tallaght (southwest Dublin), a District Court judge requested the help of the Probation Service to address the repetitive offending behaviour and difficulties experienced by Roma women in particular. The result was the development of a community service project to engage these women in a non-threatening and productive manner. It was built on the known skills of Roma women (sewing) and their manifest need for English language classes. It proved popular and there was a high rate of attendance: of three projects completed, not one participant has been returned to court for non-attendance. The presentation of toys made in the project to a children’s hospital received positive media coverage. Community service therefore can both address offending behaviour and bring about behavioural change.

Keywords: Social and cultural factors, communication, added value to community service.

Introduction

There is no evidence that members of the Roma community are at a higher risk of offending or have a higher rate of conviction than other groups in Irish society. However this does not relieve those of us who work in the criminal justice system of the responsibility of addressing their offending behaviour in a manner which is sensitive to their culture, identifies the special characteristics of their offences and addresses their unique social, educational and other related needs. ‘Provision for the
Roma community will not be achieved without considerable attention to cultural and social factors’ (www.paveepoint.ie1).

Regular meetings take place between the senior probation officer (Tallaght) and the judge of the local District Court. During one such meeting the judge shared his concern about the numbers of repeat offenders from the Roma community coming before him. He identified these offenders as predominantly female, mothers and of a younger age group. He also stated that the offences individually were not very serious, but the repetition and frequency with which they were being convicted could result in custodial sentences being imposed. He expressed his reluctance to sentence these women to custody at this stage, but acknowledged that such a course could be necessary in the future. He requested the assistance of the local Probation Service team to help him deal with this dilemma.

Following that meeting, a probation officer assigned to community service work and the author began discussing how to respond to the request and concerns of the judge. It was decided to explore the possibility of establishing a community service project2 specifically for Roma women, taking into account their lifestyle, culture and skills. What follows is a description, in narrative form, of the process and work that resulted in the Roma project being established.

Project development

The Probation Service in Tallaght had (in 2005) a limited experience of working with referrals from the Roma community. The response of members of that community to structured assessment and supervision was varied but overall, from the point of view of the Probation Service, it was not very fruitful or productive. Those who were referred were often reluctant to engage positively and were unwilling to keep in contact with the service. The first obstacle to be overcome was communication – most of the Roma community had very poor English language skills. The system of assessment and supervision sessions on a weekly or monthly schedule appeared to be alien to the lifestyle of members of the Roma

1 Pavee Point is a partnership of Irish Travellers and settled people working together to improve the lives of Irish Travellers by promoting social justice, solidarity, socio-economic development and human rights.

2 Such projects are provided for in the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Act 1983. Participants are offenders convicted of an offence and sentenced to a term of detention or imprisonment which is suspended pending the completion of a set number of hours (between 40 and 240) of community service.
community. In addition, female offenders would frequently arrive in the office with very young children; the office in Tallaght does not have crèche facilities for children, thus interviewing Roma women was especially difficult.

We were also aware that members of the Roma community considered that they did not experience fairness or dignity in their dealings with statutory bodies, including justice agencies and personnel, in Romania (where 90% of the Roma living in Ireland come from). Our experience suggests that Romanian nationals (interpreters and offenders) tend to exhibit a high degree of prejudice against the Roma community.

The Roma women we came in contact with have been largely untouched by the social phenomena of feminism and equality which have had such an impact on western European societies. This is apparent in a number of key aspects of their lives. The lack of freedom in choosing a husband, the role of women as childminders, the pressure on women to beg on the streets as the source of the family income, the levels of control exercised by husbands over the minute details of their wives’ lives, domestic violence etc. All of these phenomena were cultural, and as a result would not be subject to influence through the level of contact that we were having with the women. However such realities would have to be taken into account in any attempt to develop a project that would engage the Roma women over a period of time in a non-threatening and productive manner.

On the positive side we were also aware that most Roma women were highly skilled in the craft of hand-sewing (their colourful, voluminous and multi-layered skirts and dresses are handmade by the women, who acquire the skill from a very early age). The contacts we already had with members of the Roma community indicated to us that for the most part they were resilient and resourceful people who were used to surviving in hostile social environments. The Roma women, in particular, were not used to having their skills and abilities recognised. When it was decided to take the first steps to establish the project, these factors helped us make a number of decisions about the functioning, working and scope of the project.

**Project design**

With the explicit endorsement of the District Court judge, we set about designing a community service project which would be both restorative
to the community and beneficial to the offenders/participants. It was decided to build on the known skills of the women and base the work of the project on sewing and making soft toys. Fortunately we were able to call on the services of a long-serving and skilled community service supervisor (who has been doing precisely this type of work for over 20 years).

It was also decided that an integral part of the project should be English language classes. Again we were fortunate to be able to use the staff of the Tallaght Probation Project, one of whom, a highly qualified English language and English literacy tutor, was assigned to work with the women.

In discussions among ourselves and with other agency personnel, it was decided to establish priorities for the project. The following goals were set out:

1. Completion of the community service order within an acceptable timeframe.\(^3\)
2. Meeting the Probation Service’s requirement to provide work of a suitable kind for offenders by basing the restorative element of the project around the known skills of the Roma women – namely sewing and making soft toys.
3. In accordance with the wishes of the District Court judge, addressing the women’s poor English language and literacy skills during the hours of community service. An anticipated added value in providing this type of instruction was that it could enable better integration of the women and also of their children. ‘However, for Roma to participate in English classes it is necessary for Roma-specific measures to be taken. Past experiences of discrimination mean that Roma adults often feel uncomfortable unless in the company of their own people. Furthermore, a limited experience of education means that appropriate teaching models may need to be employed’ (Roma Support Group: www.romasupport.ie).

\(^3\) Community service is a direct alternative to imprisonment and failure to comply with the terms of the order may activate breach proceedings which may result in imprisonment. Section 2 of the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Act 1983 states: ‘This Act applies to a person (in this Act referred to as an “offender”) who is of or over the age of 16 years and is convicted of an offence for which, in the opinion of the court, the appropriate sentence would but for this Act be one of penal servitude, of imprisonment or of detention in Saint Patrick’s Institution, but does not apply where any such sentence is fixed by law’.
4. Perceiving the Roma community as a relatively insulated group, and concerned that the women’s access to health services might be deficient, the Public Health Nursing Service would be invited to address the participants on the availability of child health and women’s health services. ‘Roma women sometimes do not seek medical attention until late in their pregnancy, presenting difficulties around ante-natal and post-natal care. Most Roma qualify for medical cards, however they sometimes feel they do not get sufficient support and information from health authorities to guide them through the application process’ (www.romasupport.ie).

5. Including a session on the issues of offending behaviour and the need to desist from it (targetted specifically at offences Roma women are frequently found guilty of – begging and shoplifting).

**Actioning the project**

One of the first issues we had to face was where to locate the project. It was important that the site would not be a ‘public place’ or a location where members of the public had access. Our concern was to ensure that there would be no potential for further identification of Roma women with antisocial behaviour in the public mind. It was decided to use a suitable space in the offices of the Probation Service in Tallaght. This location was also accessible to the clients and to the inter-agency staff members whom we wished to recruit. Because of the nature and novelty of this project it was also envisaged that there would be more probation officer contact required than on a standard community service project.

The issue of childcare was foremost in our discussions about potential problems with the project and strategies to avoid them. We knew from our contact with members of the Roma community that women have almost sole responsibility for childrearing. We also knew that this was an unrecognised burden for many of them. It was decided that, rather than provide childcare facilities for the duration of the project, the hours of work would be limited to five per day and we would inform the women that they would have to arrange for the fathers of the children or some other suitable person to care for the children during the hours of the project. We saw this approach as beneficial to the participants in that it would provide them with some child-free time and opportunities to interact in a positive and rewarding manner with the supervisor, probation officers, teacher, other Roma women etc. without distraction.
or interruption. We also hoped that it might encourage the fathers of the children to take an active parenting role, particularly for the very young children. We were conscious of the potential risks to children in this approach, however we stressed the need for the women to make adequate and careful arrangements for childminding (this included the need to discuss with Probation Service personnel any concerns they might have in this regard).

There were, and still are, community service projects in which the sole participants are women. The question arose for us, should we refer the Roma women to those projects? It could be argued that this would promote integration and tolerance of and for the Roma people. However these projects concentrate on the restorative work alone. As outlined earlier, we were of the view that there was greater potential for behavioural change by taking a wider approach with the participants than is the norm for community service. Hence we concluded that the possible (minor and unknown) benefits of integration were far outweighed by the more targeted approach of the Roma project.

Following a period of discussion within the Tallaght office and consultation with other agencies it was decided to start the project. Contacts were made with staff at the Health Service Executive, Pavee Point (which has members of the Roma community participating in its programmes), the manager of the Tallaght Probation Project and probation colleagues working on a community service project for women. The goals set out above were to be addressed using statutory and non-statutory resources.

We identified a group of Roma women who had been placed on community service orders in Tallaght District Court. Although requests were made for referrals from probation colleagues outside the Tallaght area, no other referrals were made.

The principal activity of the project was sewing and making soft toys. This proved to be very popular with the women because it was a craft with which they were familiar and were proud to demonstrate their skills and abilities. It was also very acceptable to the women because the community service supervisor was able to enhance their skills by teaching them how to use sewing machines.

We also decided to place a strong emphasis on the acquisition of English language and literacy skills, making it a part of every day’s activities. The English literacy tutor held group and individual lessons each day. Both were very successful in engaging the participants in the
activities with the result that there was a very high rate of attendance. Indeed most of the women arrived each day prior to the official starting time.

In order to facilitate the childcare obligations of the women it was decided to begin the work at 9.30 a.m. and finish at 2.30 p.m. each day. For organisational reasons within the Probation Service, the project was restricted to five days every two weeks. With hindsight this was probably a good idea anyway and accounted in some way for the high level of attendance.

Three projects have been completed. None of the participants (13) have been returned to court (breached) for non-attendance. One has been reconvicted on similar charges and participated in a second project.

It was our intention that the items manufactured in the projects would go to local charities. This is what happened to a large extent. However one participant requested that she be allowed to send some of the items to her grandchildren (toys) and children (curtains, bedding etc.) living in poor circumstances in Romania. In view of the fact that Irish people have sent large amounts of aid to charities in that country, it was decided that we could not object to this request.

Most of the items made on the projects went to the National Children’s Hospital in Tallaght. Contact was made with the matron of the hospital midway through the first project. She expressed interest in accepting the toys. She also requested that some other types of craftwork be supplied and requested that they be fire-proofed. The ever-resourceful supervisor was able to arrange this. In the week before Christmas 2005, the first presentation of toys and Christmas decorations was made at a reception in the hospital, in the presence of the participants. The judge of Tallaght District Court was also there and praised the women for their achievement. Every child in the hospital received a toy and every child going home before Christmas received a handmade fabric Christmas decoration to bring home.

Importantly, this event received positive coverage in the national and local media, which hopefully contributed to a more positive image of members of the Roma community, and indeed of other offenders, in the public mind. Special emphasis was put on the fact that the Roma women were making a positive contribution to their local Irish community.

Two more projects have taken place since then. There has been no significant change in either the numbers attending or the completion rates. For the third project we had one woman who was not on a community service order. She was on a probation bond and was happy
to attend and avail of the opportunity to enhance her sewing skills and develop her facility with the English language. She is still on a probation bond and continues her supervision.

Currently there is no project taking place. Will we do it again? Of course. Now that the format is set, the organisational aspects are simplified. The only problem at this time is that we do not have appropriate referrals. Is this a measure of success?

**Conclusion**

Learning points from applying this community service project are:

- Community service can play a much greater role in bringing about behavioural change when it promotes the positive self-image of the offenders, addresses their social needs and enhances their social skills.
- This type of community service project provides an opportunity to address the offending behaviour of participants.
- Community service should create the opportunity to identify and enhance the skills and address the needs of participants, and not just be about ‘getting the hours done’.
- The greater the involvement of probation officers, the bigger return for the participants.
- The project reduced reconviction rates.
- Participants benefit from inter-agency (statutory and non-statutory) co-operation.
- The project offered us an insight into the position of women in Roma society and specifically the cultural pressures that place them at risk of offending.
- The modular approach allows for inputs to change and increase (for instance, the next project will include a module on domestic violence, which we have learned is a relevant issue for some Roma women).
- The targetted approach and Roma-specific character of the projects contributed to the high level of attendance.
- No Roma women have received custodial sentences in Tallaght District Court since the programme began.