

Moving on

The relationship between police officers and some Traveller and Gypsy communities can be one of mutual suspicion. This is one reason why a Derbyshire police officer took on the role of improving relations between his force and local Travellers and won the 2004 Queen's Award for innovation in police training and development. Tina Orr-Munro reports.

Three years ago, fifteen-year-old Johnny Delaney was attacked while walking home. Five youths kicked him to the ground and stamped on his head. He later died in hospital from his injuries.

Johnny belonged to a community of Travellers and witnesses testified that he was called a gypsy during the attack, however the judge deemed that it was not racially motivated and two sixteen-year-old boys, who cannot be

named for legal reasons, were each given four and half years for the manslaughter of Johnny Delaney.

Johnny, who looked far younger than his years, was killed because he was a member of an ethnic minority group, according to the Traveller community.

'As far as we are concerned it was a racist attack on Travellers, but we feel that our concerns are not recognised in wider society, although we should be considered an ethnic minority,' says Patrick Delaney, Johnny's father.

Trevor Phillips, chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), also could not understand the judgement.

'It is extremely hard to see how this particular killing wasn't motivated in some way by racial prejudice. It would be most disturbing if the attack wasn't considered racially motivated because the victim wasn't black or Asian. The extreme levels of public hostility that exist in relation to Gypsies and Travellers would be met with outrage if it was targeted at any other racial group,' he said after the verdict.

But where the

murder of Stephen Lawrence, the black teenager, sparked an inquiry that was to have a profound impact on race relations in the police service, Johnny's death passed by, largely unnoticed, beyond the Gypsy and Traveller community.

Sgt John Coxhead, of Derbyshire Constabulary, says this is likely to be symptomatic of how Gypsies and Travellers are treated generally by society.

'They are aliens as far as many are concerned and in terms of improving our relationship with them they don't even appear on the radar.'

Two years ago, Sgt Coxhead, the force Gypsy and Traveller



Working with the community: Sgt John Coxhead



liaison officer, accepted the role that has now propelled him to the forefront of improving relations between the police and Gypsies and Travellers.

'There was a site on our section and the inspector asked me if I would take on the role of Gypsy and Traveller liaison officer and be our point of contact.'

His initial meetings with the Traveller community, of which there are an estimated 300,000 living in the UK, were predictably difficult.

'The first thing they said to me was 'well what do you want?' I said I didn't want anything other than to talk to them, but their attitude was, 'well you never come here unless you want something'. It took time and tenacity to get them to understand that I just wanted to get to know them.'

As Sgt Coxhead became more involved in the community he began to recognise the level to which they were marginalised and that they were not receiving the best service from the police. His experience prompted him to write *Moving Forward*, looking at training to improve relations between the police and Gypsy and Traveller communities.

The project won the 2004 Queen's Award for innovation in police training and development. The project aims to improve police performance by engaging fully with the Gypsy and Traveller communities, not just in Derbyshire, but also across the service.

Sgt Coxhead says that where the service has embraced working with black and Asian minority

ethnic groups, the same could not be said of the Gypsy and Traveller communities.

Before he wrote the project, Sgt Coxhead conducted a questionnaire at the Police National Diversity Trainers' Network in 2003. In it, two thirds of trainers said they did not feel professionally equipped to challenge racism exhibited in their training sessions toward Gypsies and Travellers. Worryingly, all of them reported racism from officers and staff towards this group of people during the training sessions.

The *Moving Forward* project, which is dedicated to Johnny Delaney, and was launched in April 2004 at the *Pride not Prejudice* conference organised jointly by the police and Gypsy and Traveller communities. This in itself was a first as the community took charge of the conference and dictated its content and format.

The project sets out a number of 'guiding principles' for the police for a more effective relationship with Gypsies and Travellers.

Sgt Coxhead says the community is not hard to reach, especially as they are represented on the internet, but persistence is key as Gypsies and Travellers often believe that people only approach them to 'use them' for their own short term issues.

'There are no short cuts, but be persistent because the community will work with you if you're genuine and recognise the need to work together,' he says.

His report contains many practical suggestions on engaging the community, including liaising

with organisations like The Gypsy Council and Irish Traveller Movement.

Publications such as *Traveller's Times* and *Friends, Families and Travellers* are another avenue for officers as they reach a wide audience.

The issue of training is also examined in the project. Sgt Coxhead believes the best way forward is for officers to leave the classroom and go out into the communities that they serve to really get to know Gypsy and Traveller communities on a one-to-one basis.

'In the real world the police are in the community and training should be about involving the police in the community, not the other way round. If things are to change they will change in the workplace, not in the classroom.'

'It isn't about more time in the classroom, it is about what happens at three o'clock in the morning on Saturday. What we need to do is mainstream those issues in the workplace,' he says.



The report makes 29 recommendations in all and has been extremely well received most importantly by the very group it aims to help.

Mr Delaney, who in 2004 produced a short film where he spoke of the tragic death of this son to increase awareness of racism towards Gypsies and Travellers, says: 'This project carries with it a lot of hope from many Travellers of improvement we all need and I ask simply this - listen to us and do everything you can to help improve things.'

'I can't describe the pain that I have lived through in Johnny's loss, but I know that we need to make sure this never happens again.'

The police service is also beginning to take note. The report has been presented to the Association of Police Authorities (APA) and this month the Gypsy and Traveller community will be the main topic at the annual Police Diversity Trainers conference.

Sgt Coxhead believes that there is still much to do: 'We have only really raised the issue from treating these people like animals to now beginning to include them in the debate.'

So what will success look like for the officer who is now approached by members of the Gypsy and Traveller community wherever he travels, including abroad?

'It is simple really. For me success will be for a Gypsy or Traveller to be able to go into a police station and be treated just like everyone else.'



Both sides of the fence

PC Steve Dean, an instructor and breeding manager at the Met's dog training centre in Keston. He is also from a Gypsy family and advises the force on Gypsy and Traveller issues, a role that came about quite by chance, he says.

'The police have only recently shown interest in the Gypsy community in the last couple of years mainly because they are now considered an ethnic group. But I would say that they remain the last bastion in terms of groups that people feel comfortable not recognising and respecting.

'When I was asked to identify my ethnic origin on the annual forms we are sent, I was affronted to be lumped into other groups, so I put Romany under the 'others' section. Someone from Scotland Yard contacted me and now if they want advice on Gypsy issues they contact me.'

He says that any problems that are encountered tend to focus around misunderstandings about Gypsy culture and way of life.

'There is a misconception that because Gypsies may not be well educated then they are not very intelligent and people do look down on them.

'I recently advised on a Gypsy funeral which involved up to 15 lorries full of wreaths. The force was concerned that they would offend the Gypsy community if they supplied motorcycle riders because of the traffic disruption. I said they would be absolutely fine with idea as long as they were at the back.

'If they hadn't had that police presence chances are other motorists would get impatient and start tooting their horns which would be regarded as disrespectful and before you know you have a fight on your hands.'

PC Dean is coming up for retirement in November. In his thirty years of service, he has never been subjected to racism while in uniform, but has experienced it as a member of the Gypsy community.

'I was breaking in a horse with my dad and leaning to one side to keep it calm and stop it getting skittish. A police car drove by as close as it could to the horse to deliberately scare it and the officer shouted abuse at us.'

PC Dean is currently exploring the idea of setting up a staff association for officers from a Gypsy or Traveller community.

'Not only could we offer support to each other, but also break down some of the misunderstandings surrounding the Gypsy and Traveller community. One side of my family is Gypsy and I am very proud of my heritage. My grandparents were lovely people.

'But it important to stress that this is about equality and equal treatment. Some minority groups want better treatment than others. It is very important that that doesn't happen as it just results in conflict. Equality has to mean just that.



Case Study:

PC Roger Varley, who works at Hillingdon borough, kept his Romany background secret when he started his police career in 1978 because he says some officers 'looked down their noses' at him.

He says: 'I made a mistake early in my career and told a couple of people and I have kept it quiet since then.

'But there is no real problem now as far as I am concerned. There is now a better atmosphere in the job.'

PC Varley's father and grandparents are Romany, but PC Varley has always lived in a permanent housing and initially followed his father into engineering. He says his family were supportive of his decision to join the police.

'Engineering did not suit me and I joined the police service. I talked it over with my family and there was a great deal of encouragement, especially from my grandparents.'

Good practice in forces

Merseyside: Training developed with the Gypsy and Traveller Liaison Officer has been used in an 'Advanced People Skills' module. Input from a member of the local community and the film made by Patrick Delaney also used to promote awareness. Plans are afoot to run an event on a Gypsy/Traveller site.

Cumbria Constabulary: Organised a Gypsy and Traveller training day on behalf of the Cumbria Joint Agency Traveller Group, the Criminal Justice Board Confidence Target Group and the Cumbria Race and Diversity Group. Ideas for the day were contributed by Gypsies and Travellers. The day helped break down misunderstandings and promote better services.

Kent: Gypsies and Travellers are involved in training the trainers. Over time trust and confidence have developed and the community also advise the police on practical ways to improve the service. There has even been interest from the community in joining the police. The force says 'real engagement has no substitute in building trust.'

Derbyshire: Considerable levels of trust have been built up over a long period. Gypsies and Travellers often attend local public meetings alongside police to promote better community relations. Mediation has been used to resolve problems over unauthorised sites.

Main recommendations from the *Moving Forward* project:

- Role of police in evictions should be impartial and any tactics of 'escorting' should be challenged
- A staff association to help the small number of serving Traveller and Gypsy officers
- Involve local Traveller communities in principles of neighbourhood policing
- Extended use and further development of the Johnny Delaney film as a powerful means of reaching policing audiences
- Traveller representation in inspection processes to increase trust and confidence
- Mediation should be encouraged, but can only be achieved if a relationship based on trust exists
- Any practise, policy or structure that reinforces Travellers as not holding racial status should be challenged
- Site provision is a central issue that needs addressing to ease tensions