

Draft: Template for Local Traveller Groups: Putting together a multi-agency conflict coordination Group

This is proposed text for a Traveller group to use as a starter template for engagement with external agencies in setting up a coordinating group to respond to escalated conflict in an area. Setting one up is good practice regardless of whether you feel conflict is occurring or not as it can be a vital resource if conflict escalates into an area where you feel the project no longer can intervene (see escalation chart). It may also be a very useful forum for dialogue where there is friction or conflict between projects and agencies.

In advance of setting up this space, projects should have used this ITM resource to become conflict aware and have greater confidence in talking about the broad spectrum of conflict as communication and relationship breakdown in relation to meeting needs. Projects should now be equipped to look at roles, responses and have developed and communicated their Conflict Statement this to their community ideally in advance of developing a local multi-agency conflict response coordinating group.

Why form a coordinating group in relation to conflict?

As per the ITM Community Charter, we have already developed our analysis on the broad role of a Traveller organisation and how we communicated that to agencies:

“Our organisation is a collective voice representing Travellers in the area. We, nor any Travellers, are responsible for the actions carried out by Travellers. **We were not set up to “police” the community.**

As a Traveller organisation, we bring Travellers together to look and creates an awareness of the conditions that they face, such as how services are delivered, which agencies are responsible and how the policies that have been developed govern service delivery in this area. Travellers will always have the opportunity to come together as a collective in our organisation to work together to identify any potential issues with service delivery or policy development that affects their lives. As a Traveller-led organisation we are keen to find appropriate solutions to the issues the community faces in conjunction with State agencies as we recognise that Travellers or Traveller organisations cannot work on these alone.”

One of the early complaints that ITM members made in relation to Traveller conflict was that Traveller groups were being asked to “solve” all the issues, even when there clearly was a need and a role for other agencies in preventing, resolving and de-escalating or containing conflict. ITM takes the view that a partnership approach between Travellers, Traveller organisations and agencies is needed to create an effective response to Traveller conflict.

Traveller organisations, for their part, need to become conflict aware and develop their understanding and analysis to define their role in relation to Traveller conflict within the community and also present this to external agencies. Once you are clear on what the project can do, it is important to share this and invite collaboration with agencies to ensure that Traveller groups are no longer seen by State agencies as being the only organisation with an interest in reducing Traveller conflict.

By taking a lead role in bringing together a conflict coordinating group, not only does it allow Traveller organisations to clearly map out their roles, it also allows them to shape and convene the role of the coordinating committee and what its aims and objectives can be.

Bringing the committee together

Ideally, a committee would be brought together in a period when tensions are low or there is no escalated conflict. Typically these committees are brought together in a moment of intense conflict to see what roles agencies and Traveller organisations can play in reducing or deescalating conflict, including pooling resources to bring outside expertise where none exists locally. This reactive response often leads to a too narrow focus on crisis intervention and motivation to address the roots of conflict often disappears once the crisis has abated even though the issues may remain unresolved. Conflict management requires a more sustained and strategic approach if it is to achieve desired results.

If the project has used this ITM resource to become conflict aware and has begun defining its role with the community, it can initiate bringing agencies together, either through specially convened task groups or via the Local Traveller Interagency Committee. This gives greater scope for a Traveller project to map out a vision for how the Project and various stakeholders can work together while at the same time present a broader view of healthy communication and sustainable communities rather than just emergency responses to conflict.

Unmet needs are core causes of conflict. Much conflict work therefore depends on contextual factors external to the project and the Traveller community, such as the provision of culturally appropriate, non-crowded, resourced accommodation; inclusive education, safe spaces for children and families, employment opportunities; areas to express culture (including keeping horses) and freedom from racism. Any effective conflict management work will need to address how such needs can be met and this will require collaboration between various civil society and statutory agencies and the community.

In framing and inviting people to this committee, it is important that it is not done in a confrontational way (“you contribute to conflict”) but in a positive way, as stressed in this resource, that promotes solutions based on “win/win” that appeal to engagement in this structure and demonstrating how it can help the agencies and the project achieve their goals by such collaboration.

Who needs to be invited to participate?

While it is important that the membership of this group should not get too big it is important to include key people who would have expertise or who work directly with Travellers in the local area such as the HSE, An Garda Síochána, Department of Social Protection, TUSLA (in relation to potential impact on education & young people), schools, JLO, Youth groups, local mediation/ restorative justice, services, etc.

The Local Traveller Organisation, once it is conflict aware and has developed its own thinking and policies, could propose at the Interagency Committee to set up a subgroup to

look at how agencies would coordinate if there was a crisis in the area and collaborate on the broader issues of conflict management/ containment, prevention and resolution.

At this first meeting (assuming there is no crisis to respond to) the Traveller group could give an input based on some analysis on [what conflict is](#) (link to this in about section), the impact of [Traveller Conflict](#), the [root causes of Traveller Conflict](#), the need for the proposed coordination group and also their [Conflict Strategy](#). A discussion at this point can look at what roles (link) can be taken when conflict breaks out, and by looking at if a conflict escalates, where the role of a Traveller project might end and the role of the Gardai might start, for example.

Using the analysis the ITM and the project has developed on improving communication, it will be crucial that the presentation is aware of rank, power and also potential triggers for agencies in hearing potentially “difficult” information in relation to the root causes of conflict- framing this discussion will be crucial. If this is the first meeting, if all root causes of conflict are framed as solely the “blame” of the agencies who have been invited to attend, it is very likely that many people will be offended and not return- which naturally will undermine the rationale for this committee!

Establishing the purpose of the Traveller Community Conflict Coordination Group

Given that the Traveller project will have a greater sense of the impacts and understanding of Traveller conflict, you can prepare in advance a rationale of what the need for and the purpose of the group is. Here are some suggestions:

- The initial purpose of the group is to develop a shared understanding of what conflict is and determine our roles and responses should conflict arise in this county/area.
- Should conflict arise we need to establish how to monitor the danger and what the potential impacts will be for everyone, Travellers, service providers and Community organisations.
- Should disputes occur or escalate, we need to agree how we will work together so we can quickly respond and coordinate our efforts.
- Work together to address issues which may lead to or escalate conflict and build positive communication and relations.

If you are meeting because conflict has occurred/escalated:

In our experience, when serious conflict occurs, it has been of vital importance to for an Interagency Group to coordinate from as early a time as possible to create a response plan and execute in a timely manner in order to contain the conflict, prevent it escalating and support the local Traveller community to manage and seek ways to address the conflict.

To ensure that this group has the best possibility of success it needs to have legitimacy with the Travellers it is working with. Therefore it is important that this group is seen to have an

independent executive authority, with each stakeholder being an equal member. It is vital that the local Traveller group lead this group where possible, given that if this resource is being used, the local project will have a greater analysis and understanding,

As such, the core role of the project should be to:

1. Assess the seriousness of the incident and agree that there is an issue in the air and agree that if un-addressed, that this will impact negatively on Travellers and hence on the work of everyone concerned and on the need to convene this committee immediately.
2. Agree a plan for addressing the current conflict and its impact in consultation with the Traveller families and other stakeholders (based on a conflict map)
3. Identify short and medium term goals and actions to ensure safety and create a space for dialogue employing a third party expert if necessary and commit resources to this
4. Identify background roots and factors fuelling the conflict and develop a longer term strategy for addressing them – using a consultant/ facilitator where necessary
5. Ensure that adequate funding is available to support the strategy and actions to be undertaken.
6. Coordinate the interventions of different support agencies and consultants to ensure effective communication, complementarity, collaboration and effective use of resources
7. Monitor and evaluate progress and impact of interventions and progress in building relationships and addressing contentious issues
8. Ensure learning and insight from actions taken and experience is harvested and shared to enhance any future interventions which may be needed here or elsewhere

However this core involvement will be refined in the light of initial investigation (see response doc) and the resources available to the project when the roles to be taken by the project will be clarified and communicated to stakeholders.

If a group was to form, this has worked in other areas

Key Principles: The group should be underpinned by key principles including:

- Parity of esteem – all stakeholders on the group will have an equal voice and input.
- Clarity of roles – Stakeholders will have other ‘official’ functions in relation to Travellers, externally to this group. It is therefore important that each stakeholder should ensure that their role in relation to this group is clear and that appropriate information is brought to this process without external roles influencing the work of this group.
- Relationship with Travellers: - That this group agrees seeks to work in partnership with Travellers and include Travellers voice in the development of the strategies of this group.
- Consensus: Decisions and actions are made by consensus and ways are found to address minority concerns
- Respect and Confidentiality – Everyone’s views should be heard and considered and remain confidential apart from agreed external communications to avoid escalation or endanger individuals or families.
- Communications: - The group’s agrees a communication strategy for communicating with media, external groups and Travellers that will be supported by all stakeholders.

- Co-ordination: - that the group shares appropriate information about its plans with other agencies and organisations so that any actions in relation to the conflict can be part of co-ordinated strategies at local and national levels.
- Attention to process: - the group commits to model and review their communication and relationships in line with the values and practices they are promoting.

Legitimacy of the group: It is important that the legitimacy of this group is established with all stakeholders – especially within the Traveller community. The group is currently self-appointed and it is important that it confirms its legitimacy by engaging the community and keeping them informed and included in the work of the group.

Traveller organisations, if they have engaged the community in discussions about conflict and the role of the project, will already have legitimacy bestowed upon it by agreement of Travellers.