

# Working Towards Peace: a Report on the Midlands Traveller Conflict and Mediation Initiative

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Produced by the coordinator of the Traveller Interagency  
Programme



pobal

government supporting communities

## Focus and Values of the MTCMI Intervention:

**Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)** is generally taken to mean a way of resolving disputes outside of the court systems. In this initiative, the focus is on mediation, achieving mutually agreeable and amicable solutions to disputes and violent conflict.

The **MTCMI project steering group** is clear about where it should fit with existing services:

*'A successful mediation/ADR initiative cannot be a substitute for effective and consistent policing. They complement each other.'*

The **core values** underpinning the mediation work of the MTCMI are

*Mediator Neutrality: mediators do not take sides and do not make judgements.*

*Confidentiality: all meetings/discussions are confidential unless otherwise agreed by all parties.*

*Honesty and integrity of all parties is expected.*

*Voluntary participation of all parties*

*Self-determination: mediators help parties to find their own best solutions to their own problems. Mediators do not make decisions about what should happen.*

It should be noted that some of the conflict interventions undertaken by MTCMI are of a fire-fighting nature and in the initial stages, at least, may not always be capable of adhering to the requirement for voluntary participation.

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### Acronyms

<i>ADR</i>	<i>Alternative Dispute Resolution</i>
<i>HSE</i>	<i>Health Service Executive</i>
<i>MTCMI</i>	<i>Midlands Traveller Conflict and Mediation Initiative</i>
<i>TIG</i>	<i>Traveller Interagency Group (of which there is one in each local authority area)</i>
<i>WEP</i>	<i>Westmeath Employment Pact</i>

*The Interim Report* refers to the earlier report on the Midlands Traveller Conflict and Mediation Initiative, produced by Pobal's Traveller Interagency Programme (August, 2010).

*The 2008 Report* refers to the Traveller conflict research in the four counties, commissioned in 2008 by Offaly TIG, undertaken by Sean McGearty, Ian White and Hannagh McGinley

## Executive Summary

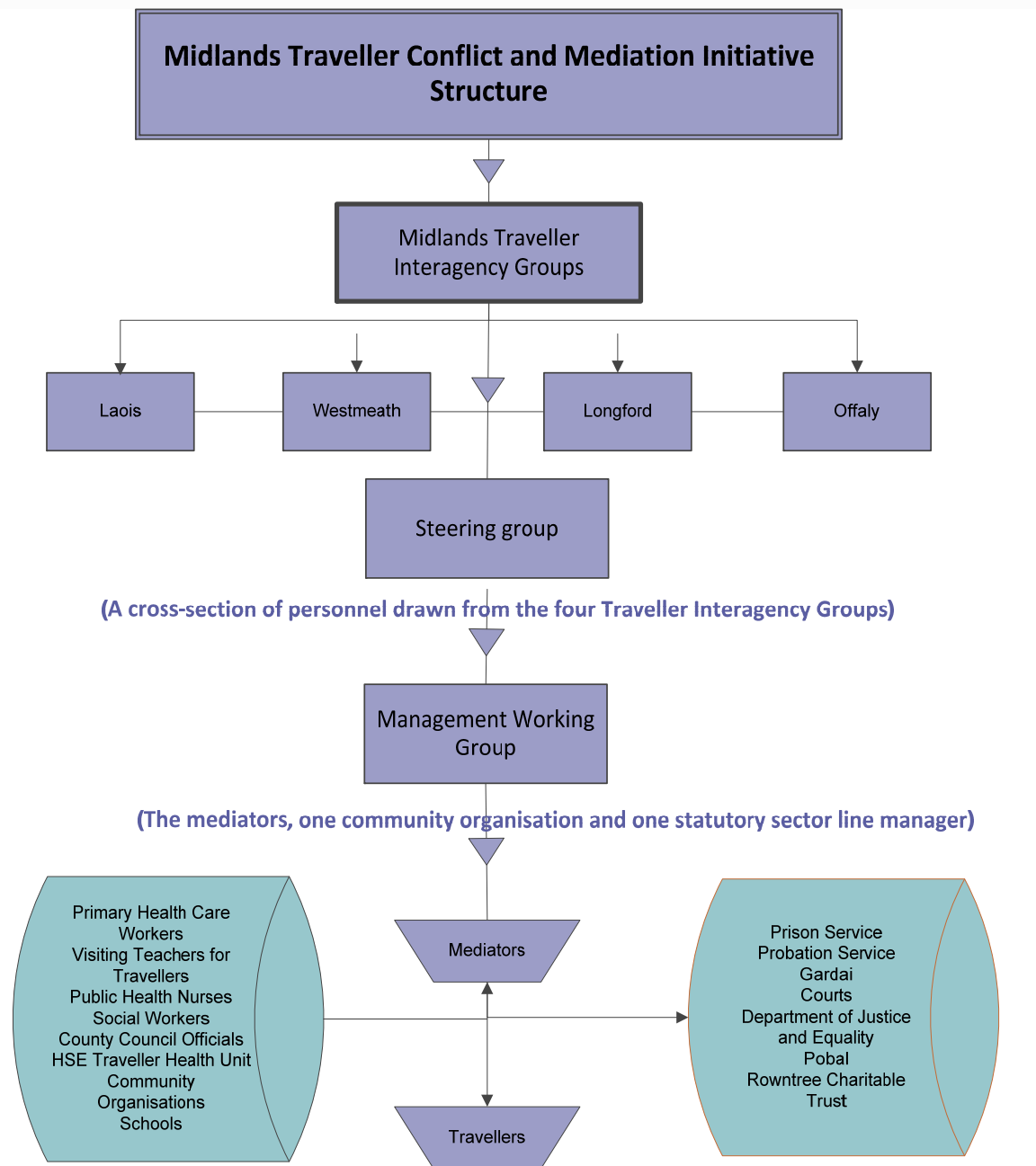
This report reviews and assesses the value of the Midlands Traveller Conflict and Mediation Initiative (MTCMI), which became operational in December, 2009. The report outlines and comments on the context, establishment and first fifteen months of operations of the initiative. It details and assesses outcomes and impact in relation to conflict interventions and capacity building. It also examines challenges facing the project. It reviews the project in terms of value for money and potential replication. The final section of the main document outlines the major learning points. The three overarching recommendations which emerge from project analysis have been moved forward to this page (see below) for ease of access. The report concludes with three appendices which include examples of the mediators' work, a selection of quotes from interviews conducted in researching the initiative and details concerning selection of interviewees.

## Recommendations

1. The project is reaching the end of its original funding. There is a real danger that, if it falls, the extraordinary gains made will be reversed. The statutory sector in the Midlands and at national level should, as a priority, find the funding to sustain the initiative. Failure to do so will result in far greater expenditure in policing, healthcare and accommodation repair and replacement; this is the considered opinion of senior officials in relevant areas of the statutory sector involved with the initiative.
2. Every attempt should be made to ensure that future alternative conflict interventions in this or other parts of the country operate in a similar way or, at least, take on board the learning in relation to extensive collaboration and interagency involvement in conflict management.
3. Pre-service and in-service garda training should be reviewed in the light of report findings, to ensure that gardaí and particularly junior gardaí, who have little contact with the Traveller community outside of criminality, have a greater understanding of the diversity of the community, of the trauma visited on the community by criminality and of the reasons for their reluctance to engage with gardaí for personal protection from members of their own community.
4. MTCMI has clearly demonstrated that gardaí, Travellers and council officials can form durable alliances with ease and discuss and find solutions to seemingly intractable problems, when presented with the opportunity to do so, whether through expert facilitation, joint training or interagency cooperation. Every effort must be made to transmit this message and have similar approaches, which reduce or eliminate power differentials, adopted nationally.
5. Productive ways of communicating with and reporting concerns to an Garda Síochána, other than walking into a garda station, need to be more effectively communicated to the Traveller community.

6. Traveller organisations , Traveller elders and those working with both need to assist some families to review and re-orientate current 'cultural' behaviours e.g. alternative and ineffective methods of solving disputes, such as 'fair fights' and ensure that they are challenged and eliminated. Regressive elements of child-rearing (e.g. storytelling conveying to children antagonism towards other family 'names') which perpetuate inter-generational strife also need to be addressed, where they occur. Changes to both behaviours cited here have been named by Travellers in the course of the initiative as potentially progressive improvements that can be initiated and effected by the community.
7. Travellers, gardaí, community organisations and statutory agencies working with Travellers need to be aware of the potentially disastrous use of social networking to foment violence, and need to form alliances and procedures to work together to combat misuse rapidly and effectively. There is an urgent need also to initiate training to help reduce anger-driven response to social network provocation.
8. The steering group should ensure that sound structures and procedures continue to be maintained and reviewed at suitable intervals. These should include:
  - Membership of all participating TIGs on the steering committee,
  - Continued inclusion of members representing the interests of Travellers and gardaí,
  - Strict maintenance of fortnightly reporting and meeting of the management working group (which includes the mediators),
  - Regular review of workload and stress of the management working group and, particularly, the mediators.

The above points in this last recommendation have been highlighted because of the potentially traumatic consequences for those involved in conflict management work; the need to identify arising problems as early as possible because of the volatility of the operational environment; and the need to maintain access for the mediators, through the steering group, to a broad range of statutory and community personnel as well as to ensure, in turn, that learning is secured by the steering group.



The interagency-led structure of MTCMI, along with a selection of those with whom it works is shown above. The array of partners is accessible and manageable because of the interagency approach and management structure, accompanied by robust reporting procedures

## Chapter 1:

# Introduction

The Midlands Traveller Conflict Mediation and Initiative (MTCMI) is a pilot project under the aegis of four Midlands Traveller Interagency Groups (TIGs) which put in place mediators, on a full-time basis, to deal with recurring violent incidents, involving extended Traveller families. It is the first time such an approach has been taken and followed two years of preparation to ensure that adequate communications and agreed structures and procedures would be in place.

This report on MTCMI has been produced by the Coordinator of the Traveller Interagency Programme in Pobal for the Department of Justice and Equality. It updates the *Interim Report* (available on the Traveller Interagency Programme pages of the Pobal website, [www.pobal.ie](http://www.pobal.ie)), which was produced following a review of the first operational six months of MTCMI and draws heavily on the original text, although there has been considerable updating and expansion to take into account subsequent developments and learning. Even though there has been no increase in the number of mediators, conflict and mediation work has expanded exponentially since Summer 2010, when research for the *Interim Report* was carried out. Interviews undertaken in Spring 2011, while including a number of those originally interviewed, also drew on the broader group of organisations and individuals now being engaged with.

MTCMI is co-funded by the Department of Justice and Equality and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Lesser funding has also been made available by the HSE Midlands Traveller Health Unit, Traveller Health Unit (THU), Westmeath Employment Pact (WEP) and Longford Community Resources Limited, reflecting the interagency nature of the initiative. The input of the THU and WEP should not be judged in purely monetary terms, as they have made a major contribution to shaping and guiding the process and in commitment of human resources throughout the lifetime of the project.

Because the conflict management initiative, covering Laois, Offaly, Westmeath and Longford is innovative in placing mediators close to conflict centres over an extended period and has the potential to offer a template for other areas of the country, the Department of Justice and Equality requested that Pobal's Traveller Interagency Programme monitor progress on a continuous basis. It has now been doing so for fifteen months and has had access to MTCMI's detailed work reports, its steering group, the mediators and a number of their clients and associates.

The author received full cooperation from all concerned and would particularly like to thank those interviewed for their time and cooperation. Traveller interviewees deserve a separate mention, as in the course of interviews, they were prepared to be open and frank about incidents and issues which deeply affect their personal lives. The author would also like to thank the MTCMI management working group for their courtesy and diligence in providing documentation as requested and for responding without fail to several detailed queries.

## The Role of Pobal

The Pobal Traveller Interagency Programme is well placed to monitor and report on the initiative. Its core expertise is in programme and project monitoring and evaluation.

It has worked with the Traveller Policy Division in the Department of Justice and Equality over the past five years to monitor and advise local authority-based Traveller Interagency Groups (TIGs), which were formally established in 2006, as a result of the report of the Government's High Level Group on Traveller Issues. In the course of supporting and monitoring TIGs, the recent escalation of conflict in the Traveller community has been identified as the greatest challenge, other than macro-economic challenges, to the positive developments initiated by the new interagency approach, not least because of the negative perceptions, generated by violent confrontations, towards the Traveller community as a whole. In 2008, the Traveller Interagency Programme was in a position to help Westmeath TIG restructure existing funding towards mediation training and to guide Offaly TIG towards applying for funding from the Department of Justice and Equality for the proposed conflict management initiative.



## Chapter 2: Methodology

Pobal Traveller Interagency Programme has had access to documentation relating to the background and establishment of the MTCMI project since 2007. In monitoring the project, at the request of the Department of Justice and Equality, it has attended numerous training sessions, TIG meetings, steering group meetings, management working group meetings and has met on several occasions with the mediators. MTCMI documentation in the course of the project has been reviewed, including, most importantly, mediator work reports, which provide a comprehensive account of actions undertaken. The semi-structured interviews conducted with a range of players involved with the project (see Appendix 3) provide different perspectives on project progress and provide cross-sectoral independent perspectives on the mediation actions outlined in the work reports. The findings in the report rely on comparison and analysis of those and other relevant sources of information, as follows:

- A review of TIG and project monitoring by Pobal personnel in the Midlands during the period, 2006-2010;
- Research in the four counties, commissioned in 2008 by Offaly TIG and undertaken by Sean McGearty, Ian White and Hannagh McGinley (referred to, hereafter, as the 2008 Research);
- Regular meetings with members of MCTMI steering group;
- MTCMI documentation including steering group records, progress summaries and detailed work records of the mediators;
- Media reports on Traveller conflict in the Midlands;
- The Department of Justice and Equality seminars (2010) on Traveller conflict in which MTCMI participated and contributed;
- Meetings held with senior gardaí in the course of MTCMI work;
- A Traveller focus group on conflict, comprising 20 adult Travellers from the four counties;
- Two sets of interviews conducted in the Midlands in Summer 2010 and Spring 2011, to help determine the impact of the project. Although a considerable amount of oral and written evidence was available, prior to the production of the *Interim Report* in Summer 2010, suggesting that the initiative had been making a real impact, the semi-structured interviews were conducted to ensure that appraisal of the process was rounded and included the impressions of major participants and the client group. Interviews included questions to determine perceptions of the quality of the interventions but allowed those interviewed space to digress, express opinions and relate their own experiences. Those interviewed were assured that any sensitive data used in the report would be non-attributable. Traveller opinions were sought as it was important to check if client perceptions matched that of the providers.

38 individuals were interviewed, divided fairly evenly between the earlier interviews undertaken in Summer 2010 and the later set in Spring 2011. Travellers, gardaí (both junior and senior –up to and including the rank of chief superintendent), members of local authorities and statutory agencies, front-line workers with Travellers and members of the MTCMI steering group were interviewed (*see Appendix 3*). The mediators were subsequently consulted on all issues raised.

## Chapter 3:

# Overall Context

The ongoing dispute between a number of extended families in the Midlands is, for the purposes of this report, regarded as a discrete set of events. However, it took place in a broader context of increased and more intense violence and in-fighting in the Traveller community. There is considerable evidence from media reports, TIGs – the local authority Traveller Interagency Groups – and Traveller organisations that the level of conflict within the Traveller community has worsened in recent years and that the nature of the conflicts has become more serious with an increase in the number of large scale confrontations and the increasing use of weapons, including guns, in these conflicts. There is also evidence from the two mediators and from the *2008 Research* (see *Methodology p.7*) that Travellers are deeply concerned about this and that the vast majority want an end to these conflicts.

Recent violence has been stoked by a variety of factors, not always easy to disentangle. Reasons given below are drawn from presentations and discussions at conflict seminars held during 2010 by the Department of Justice and Equality, in which MTCMI participated. There is undoubtedly an element of feuding, i.e. *inter-generational in-fighting*, involved. Other contributory factors include

1. *A culture of honour where backing down is seen as weakness*: the importance of the culture of honour is clear from the inclusion in a formal agreement between families involved in the dispute affecting Mullingar Senior Traveller Training Centre of a clause specifically stating that the signatories 'understand that any breach of this agreement will reflect badly on the honour of our family'. While excessive adherence to the code has frequently led to violence, it should be said that there are positive aspects. For instance, the mediators have found, throughout the intervention, that the code of honour ensures that they can place a high degree of trust in the word of Travellers who have signed up to an agreement.
2. *Breakdown of respect for elder community members, affecting internal family discipline*: breakdown of respect for elders is reflective of trends in the wider community and, although slower to affect Traveller society, has been exacerbated by access to wealth by criminal elements at an early age, allied to their perception that they have the means and wisdom to do better for themselves than previous generations.
3. *Diminished capacity of traditional methods of Traveller community conflict resolution, such as the fair fight, to achieve binding results, allied to distrust of the formal judicial system*: the use of the fair fight to settle disputes has been largely discredited in recent times as outcomes are disputed, weapons are introduced and betting on outcomes, as well as video-posting of fights, alter their purpose. Distrust of the judicial system, without dwelling here on the many complexities which give rise to it, arises mainly from a Traveller perception of recent and historical unfairness in judgements handed down to Travellers.

4. *The relatively recent arrival of drugs and drug-dealing as a major factor affecting the lives of the Traveller community:* while the Traveller community resisted the drug culture long beyond its entry into the wider community, it has more recently become established, accompanied by the more vicious criminal attitudes and intimidatory tactics associated with the very high stakes involved. Intimidation has always played a part in gaining support during conflicts, but a new level appears to have been reached.
5. *Discrimination against the community, accompanied by voluntary self-exclusion, makes access to normal channels of conflict resolution of disputes more difficult.*

While the cycle of discrimination and self-exclusion affects every aspect of Traveller life, suffice it to say here that it severely diminishes the chances of Travellers reporting crime within their own community or approaching authorities, such as an Garda Síochána for protection.

6. *Negative consequences of Extended Family Relationships*

It is important to preface this point by noting that there are many positive effects of extended family relationships. However, major challenges can arise when criminality and violence are present. While the 2008 Research found that only a minority of Travellers engage in violent conflict and feuding in the midlands, a considerable number have become embroiled in it and many more were affected by it, for a number of reasons, many of which are connected to extended family relationships that are in turn complicated by inter-marriage.

The potential for single incidents to become sources of widespread conflagration is greatly increased in the community because of the tightly-knit bonds of extended family. A dispute in one area can, for this reason, have consequences for families living in several counties on the island.

The need to maintain ties to other families for future protection and social capital and the need to maintain business relationships (usually family-based) also exert a powerful force towards unwilling involvement of individuals and families who would prefer to steer clear of conflict.

In addition to family loyalty, there is often fear of the consequences of staying neutral, with its potential to result in loss of an individual's or family's protective network. Intimidation by protagonists and their allies is widespread and can result in large sections of the community appearing to take sides when, in fact, they are only in the picture because they cannot afford to stand aside.

7. *Involvement of Children*

Travellers who took part in the Midlands focus group, a number of those interviewed and many with whom the mediators have had contact, dwelt on the uncomfortable place children can occupy in relation to feuding. They made the following points:

- Children are sometimes brought up to hate other families;

- This is exacerbated by telling bed-time stories which, in demonstrating the prowess of their own family name, depict opposing families as the enemy;
- It is commonplace for some families to send in older brothers to intervene in disputes that their siblings get involved in, escalating the dispute;
- When young children fight, the fight can be over and forgotten quickly but not for older siblings and parents, who have come to their support and are not in a position to disengage.

Travellers, both male and female, at the Traveller mediation consultation held in Tullamore in November, 2010 were agreed that behaviours and responses, which are at the heart of inter-generational strife, need to change and that there is a willingness on the part of many to effect that change.

Most of the above factors contributing to Traveller in-fighting were evident from MTCMI work at the time of writing of the *Interim Report* and have emerged even more strongly in subsequent MTCMI interventions.

## Chapter 4:

### Origin of the Conflict Management Proposal

A number of volatile Traveller relationships existed within the Midlands region, affecting individuals and families, some originating in the distant past, others having developed more recently over fall-out from illegal business dealings and honour disputes such as broken marriages and engagements.

Even though a major focus of the MTCMI intervention has been in Mullingar (Westmeath), the proposal to undertake a conflict management process emerged from consultation around Traveller issues by Offaly TIG in 2006. Agency leaders visiting halting sites as part of consultation towards building the county Traveller strategy, realised that Travellers could not participate together in proposed training for which funding was being sought.

Despite disagreements within the TIG around consultation with Traveller representatives and around the setting of agreed priority actions, Offaly TIG decided to proceed with a conflict management project and accepted the HSE proposal that it should seek to regionalize the initiative. It came to be recognised that a single county response was likely to fail as families involved in disputes were spread over the extended area. A decision was made to commission Traveller research in Offaly, Westmeath, Laois and Longford in relation to conflict. This corresponds to the HSE Midlands region and allowed the HSE Midlands Traveller Unit to play a central role in guiding progress towards an agreed intervention. Acting on the recommendations of the 2008 Research, structures for a conflict management project were put in place.

The framework for a steering group composed of representatives of the four TIGs was agreed following a meeting of the four TIG chairmen. However, there was some TIG reluctance to proceed in view of the proposed cost. Costings, based on recommendations of commissioned research, were to meet the perceived need for extensive training and capacity building of Travellers and service providers in relation to conflict management. As in other parts of the country, providing Travellers with the skills to intervene in disputes in their own community was seen as the way forward. The research suggested prioritising peer-led delivery of mediation skills which would cost €3-4 million, an amount that was not readily available. However, it gradually became clear that peer intervention would not be sufficient to prevent conflict escalation – something that has since been substantiated in the course of the current intervention - and that Travellers could not, given the level and extent of violence be equipped to resolve issues internally, in the short term at least. The steering group became convinced that the more immediate need was for an easily accessible mediation service. The beginning of the recession also helped to concentrate minds on lean solutions, leading to an emphasis on sustained direct conflict intervention, as an immediate priority. Capacity building, however, remained an important goal, although at a reduced scale, of the MTCMI's subsequent project application for funding, which was now estimated at a much-reduced amount of c. €120,000 (although this figure was in real terms greatly augmented by the good will and human resources of steering organisations within the collaborative framework of the TIGs). It was proposed that funding would go mainly towards employing two mediators.

While the focus, agreed by the steering committee, was initially on direct intervention to manage existing disputes, the 2008 Research had identified a wide range of conflict drivers (as outlined in Table 1, below) which required a broader intervention in the medium to long term. The findings, along with subsequent learning from the Mullingar dispute, questioned the initial assumption that a lack of Traveller capacity to manage conflict was the only key issue and coupled it with a parallel lack of capacity and comfort in dealing with conflict across a range of agencies. The identification of conflict drivers also showed how agency personnel across the different service sectors, who saw themselves as unwilling victims of the consequences of conflict, were, in reality, contributing to the circumstances which sustained it, even if unwittingly.

**Table : Conflict Drivers as identified in the 2008 Midlands Research.**

The hard man culture Family power/status/pride/honour Intimidation and bullying Inequalities among Travellers	The role of the family
Lack of appropriate accommodation Competition for accommodation The allocation of accommodation Expanding families	Accommodation issues
Control of business /making money Criminal activity /drug dealing	Business interests
People stirring things up / gossip Breakdown of marriage Arranged marriage Domestic disputes	Domestic issues
Lack of protection from Gardai and courts Travellers left to sort things out A lack of sanctions/deterrents and a culture of impunity Perceptions and allegations of bias and the use of informers by Gardai	The legal system & law enforcement
Anger and frustration Discrimination Substandard living conditions Nothing to loose mentality A lack of opportunity for young men Media portrayal of Travellers	Lack of Integration
Loss of identity /culture Sedentary lifestyle Lack of respect for parent /older people	Culture and identity

*Taken from research undertaken by Sean McGearty, Ian White and Hannagh McGinley , (2008)*

## Attitudes to the Intervention

There was general support for the intervention, although not total agreement as to the form it would take.

According to steering group members, some opposition to the emphasis on law and order continued to come from within the community sector. Also, there was some opposition to direct intervention through ADR on the basis that it was the role of the gardaí to enforce the law and that interagency efforts should be concentrated on education and training as the key to progress. However, the steering group was adamant that, while improving community and agency capacity to deal with conflict was central to the process, progress could only be made, in the short term, by mediators working with Travellers, gardaí and other service providers to contain the violence. Importantly, the garda chief-superintendents and superintendents in the region were supportive of the ADR intervention from the beginning and have continued that support throughout the intervention. A meeting, early on in the process, between members of the steering group and garda superintendents from the four counties established collaboration, based on the understanding that ADR would not interfere with, but would supplement law enforcement without, however, breaching client confidentiality.

## Mullingar Dispute

While disputes and misunderstandings among Travellers and between Travellers and agencies were seen by the steering group to require intervention across the four counties, one dispute, largely centered in Mullingar, stood out above all the others and became an initial major focus of conflict management.

An outbreak of violence in the Summer of 2007 was followed by an even more violent outbreak in the Summer of 2008. Rioting in Dalton's Park, Mullingar, required a concerted garda response which included use of a helicopter, dozens of Gardai, including Public Order Unit members equipped with riot gear and a dog unit. Both Traveller and settled residents of the estate were badly affected. Pictures on national television, which vividly conveyed the level of violence, along with media reports which linked events to violent incidents, involving Travellers, in other parts of the country, did untold damage to the reputation of the Traveller community as a whole.

Locally, many aspects of Traveller life were affected by the fall-out. Relationships between the Traveller and settled communities deteriorated drastically. The conflict came to dominate the work of Westmeath TIG, forcing it to focus on feuding and conflict between Travellers and to a lesser extent between Travellers and agency personnel, at the expense of its planned work in education, training and youth development.

Mullingar Senior Traveller Training Centre (MSTTC), whose future came under threat, became a major focus of conflict, as members of opposing families had been employed there as tutors for over ten years. Work in the MSTTC was damaged by the dispute. The dynamics and main stakeholders in the violent conflict had previously changed as one of the lead families allied itself with a more powerful family for its own protection and, when a Traveller from one of the families was employed as an instructor, the centre became a central focus for conflict. Trainees became aggressive towards each other and they also started



to become selective about which classes they would attend depending on family affiliations of tutors and trainees in particular classes. The building was also attacked. An interagency project, funded by the Department of Justice and Equality had to be curtailed and in negotiation with Pobal, which managed the fund from which monies had been drawn down, funding was diverted to training around conflict management. WEP also reallocated funding which it had secured from the St. Stephen's Green Trust. As relationships with key stakeholders had earlier been developed by Ian White, a qualified and experienced mediator, during the 2008 Research, he was employed to undertake an intervention involving training around conflict management with the intention of making the centre safe for trainees and tutors and allowing it to fulfil its role in education and training effectively.

A beneficial outcome of the negotiations with Pobal to re-direct funding was that the Department of Justice and Equality became acutely aware of the extent and urgency of the issues involved and the need for sustained intervention, although it was not in a position, because of its limited funding allocation, to support an intervention until match funding became available from other sources.

However, matters deteriorated and fractures in the relationships between a number of families very soon made the continued operation of MSTTC unmanageable. The riots mentioned above appeared to make any hope of a settlement remote.

Commitment of gardaí to trying to reach a resolution to the conflict, as well as to enforcing the law, is evident before, during and after this period, from interviews with gardaí, Travellers and members of the steering group as well as from media reports such as that in the Irish Independent (*Rioting families spurned garda peace bid*, 8-8-08, p.8), which refers to the refusal of key participants to cooperate with the "intensive efforts" made by gardaí to prevent the riots. Superintendent John Gantly, who has wide experience in dealing with threatening and violent situations, led those efforts.

While training of staff and trainees in MSTTC around managing conflict had been recommended and had commenced, it was evident that relationships had deteriorated to a point where this could not proceed. On the recommendation of the mediator, MSTTC was formally closed and trainees and staff were informed that this closure was permanent.

However, following a direct intervention aimed at calming relationships between the trainees and negotiations with individuals who had a leadership role in the dispute, commitments were gathered in relation to behaviour, a formal agreement was brokered and MSTTC was re-opened. The families concerned agreed not to do anything to interfere with normal operation of the centre. While the process appeared to lead to a manageable solution in MSTTC in the short-term, the VEC ultimately and apparently without consultation with members of Westmeath TIG, closed the centre in Summer, 2009. While it was the prerogative of the VEC to do so, the unilateral action was viewed by some steering group and interagency group members as potentially divisive, as it was not part of agreed measures. Fortunately, Westmeath TIG was sufficiently robust to overcome this setback.

### Groundwork laid for MTCMI

The flow of events in Mullingar and the genesis of the MTCMI project have been outlined in some detail to give a sense of the pressure that built up on those involved, both Traveller and settled. The extensive trauma suffered by family members, including the men involved in the conflict, was later documented by the project mediators at management working group meetings and in the interviews conducted in compiling this report. Great pressure and demand for resources was also placed on gardaí, the courts, MSTTC staff and other local agencies and community organisations.

The extended, slow and, sometimes frustrating, process that took place prior to employment of the two mediators at the end of 2009 gives an indication of the difficulties involved and of the learning that was needed on the part of an array of personnel and organisations before an effective impact was likely to be made on conflict levels. The persistent attempts by those most closely associated with driving the project to elicit a shared response from agencies and organisations involved with Traveller support and service delivery over a period of almost three years laid a solid foundation for the initiative, ensuring a good understanding of what was required, shared by a wide range of personnel across the four counties.

While no funding was available to continue with the ADR intervention undertaken by the mediator, Ian White, in 2008, additional resources were considered vital to maintain buy-in from both agencies and Travellers, as well as to extend mediation across the whole region. Although there was a delay, those resources were secured towards the end of the following year, following applications to the Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Department of Justice and Equality.

## Chapter 5:

### Establishment of MTCMI

A steering group drawn from the four counties' TIGs not only gave the project a regional focus but also, crucially, established the standing of the intervention with the Social Inclusion Measures Groups and the County Development Boards in each of the four local authority areas. This, in turn, enabled effective collaboration of the community and statutory sectors with gardaí and with Travellers.

While not wishing to diminish in any way the commitment of other TIG members, three members of the steering group along with their organisations, took overall responsibility for driving the process.

Superintendent Denis Shields, who had formerly been stationed in Mullingar and was now based in Longford, had a long history of involvement with Travellers in relation to both policing and conflict resolution and a deep knowledge of relationships within the community. He was also very aware of the huge drain on agency resources, and particularly on those of the gardaí, as a result of the disputes.

Larry Fullam of Westmeath Employment Pact had a working relationship with local Travellers stretching back ten years, had a close knowledge of the history of Midlands disputes, had direct involvement in MSTTC since its inception and was committed to finding solutions to the recurring problems.

Fergal Fox, HSE Traveller Health Coordinator in the Midlands, also had several years experience in the field and, in addition to his commitment and persistence, was well placed to encourage the establishment of a regional steering group, because of his work with the four TIGs. His involvement with a range of existing Traveller initiatives afforded him an overview of the issues involved.

Together, they provided important collaborative links between the community and statutory sectors. An array of agencies and organisations also committed to the steering group. While everyone agreed that it was important that Travellers have strong representation on it, membership was problematic, because of the negative perceptions that could arise from some members of the Traveller community in relation to collaboration with policing. It was also very important to allay fears that Traveller representatives might be seen to be representing any particular side in disputes. Neutrality remains a live issue, as alliances of those involved in disputes change, and requires careful management. Traveller participation was negotiated successfully in time (although male Traveller representation on the steering group has only recently been secured). However, a positive aspect of the delay in recruiting Traveller representation seems to have been that considerable discussion ensued around the contention that only Travellers can solve Traveller issues, a discussion that some steering group members felt at the time would have been inhibited by the presence of Travellers. It is now clear from the interviews with Travellers, who openly welcome the intervention of mediators from the settled community, that agency reticence about discussing outside intervention in Traveller disputes was attributable to a false sense of political correctness, but was nevertheless real for those involved.

## Steering Group Challenges

There were some issues in relation to collaboration of different kinds that had to be dealt with at the outset:

- There was mistrust of both the process and the mediators in a number of quarters;
- There was resistance from some community sector personnel to coupling members of the Traveller community with the naming of law and order issues and criminality, as opposed to the steering group decision that it was a central component of the process;
- Some Travellers, placing great emphasis on fair and equal treatment of opposing families by the authorities, feared that settled mediators would be unduly aligned with the gardaí or with Traveller families who had greater connections with the settled community. Allied to this was an intrinsic mistrust of the settled community on the part of some;
- Members of the general public, including some councillors, were less than supportive of any slack being cut for Travellers who deserved punishment, as they perceived it. There was a genuine basis for this concern, as there are differences between the approach adopted by the criminal justice system, which aims to sanction those who violate the law, and ADR, with its primary emphasis on a settlement acceptable to all parties rather than on the punishment of the offender. It was an important task for the steering group to convince doubters that the two approaches are compatible and mutually supportive;
- The steering group also faced an operational difficulty in maintaining membership of TIG representatives across four counties because of the geographical spread. Nevertheless it was essential to do so because of the close-knit relationships of the Traveller community involved in violent disputes in the region.

Despite the difficulties and doubts referred to above, there was widespread support for the project and optimism that, if quality mediation could be put in place, real progress could be made.

## The Need for Urgent Intervention

The 2008 Research had found that violent conflict was hurting Travellers and damaging their participation in other development programmes, where there were fears regarding violent conflict, which contributed to the ongoing exclusion of Travellers. It also found that Traveller families embroiled in violent conflict in the Midlands region were expressing a strong desire to bring violence to an end. It noted that perceptions are as important as reality in conflict situations and that there were a host of conflicting perceptions at play, driving and exacerbating conflicts both within the Traveller community and between Traveller and agencies. This last finding, in particular, underlined the need for several agencies to become involved in any intervention.

Following the Summer 2009 riots in Mullingar, which alerted everyone to the scale of conflict and to the impact it was having on both Travellers and the settled community, the steering group compiled a list of

incidents and outcomes which highlighted the urgency of the situation and the need for co-ordinated action:

- Conflict has necessitated the use of the garda helicopter and riot squad on a number of occasions;
- Armed gardai have patrolled a funeral in the area;
- A curfew has been put in place in one town;
- Children have been moved to “safe houses” for fear of attacks;
- Traveller families have spent thousands of euros on security systems and effectively live in prisons;
- Entire halting sites and numerous houses have been destroyed;
- Reinforcements from third parties from different part of the country have been called in to back up local families involved in conflict;
- Members of staff of agencies in the Midlands including the gardaí have felt under threat while carrying out their duties.

## Chapter 6:

# Objectives and Rationale of MTCMI

The rationale for MTCMI was based, first and foremost, on the failure of normal intervention by the gardaí, county councils or other agencies to reduce violent incidents to a manageable level, thus reducing trauma on those affected and minimising waste of resources. This was not a reflection on the behaviour of any one agency but of the difficulties encountered in managing the conflict, both practical and cultural.

Based on research and experience, the steering group planned their intervention on four assumptions: that:

- issues could not be solved by gardaí or Travellers acting alone and that an **interagency approach** was indicated;
- given the remoteness of the Traveller Community from regular service provision, including law and order services, and given the failure of law enforcement and the judicial system to make sufficient impact on terminating disputes, the methodologies of **ADR** were required;
- a **dual approach** was required involving direct mediation along with capacity building for all players;
- the problems could not be adequately addressed within any single local authority area, necessitating **regional cooperation**;

They set out to achieve two key objectives:

- To ensure that all stakeholders acknowledge both their own and others roles and responsibilities in the current context and their potential contribution to a positive resolution of these violent conflicts.;
- To ensure that this issue is given sufficient priority by all stakeholders and that both Travellers and agencies are focused on reducing and preventing the incidence of violent conflict involving Travellers

### Interagency Approach

The *2008 Research* had noted the tendency for agencies and individuals to frame the problem as the responsibility of a particular agency, e.g. the gardai or the local authority and to view violent incidents as discrete events rather than part of a larger pattern.

While it noted that significant resources were already at play, it also stated that they were applied in a disconnected fashion. Both the research and steering group experience pointed to an urgent need for a coordinated strategy to make an impact, sustainable over time, and to increase value for money. In naming 'the drivers of conflict', referred to earlier, it effectively identified the range of stakeholders in

the conflict – many of whom did not recognise their role or potential contribution to the resolution of the underlying causes of conflict.

In response to the *2008 Research*, both community organisations and statutory agencies agreed that, if sustainable solutions were to be found, underlying complexities required an interagency approach which would enable different understandings, experiences, expertise and skills to be harnessed. The TIGs, already in existence, provided a ready-made basis for collaboration and for building and maintaining links. As well as supporting the ADR programme of activities, TIGs could take on a role in serving as crisis/incident monitoring committees.

### Dual Approach

Given the explosive nature of the Mullingar situation, the steering group was adamant that a direct conflict intervention was a priority, although as part of a dual approach which addressed the broader drivers of conflict. The initiative needed to make an immediate impact on Traveller violence but also needed to build capacity of Travellers and agencies to address long-term conflict management. This, in turn, required an understanding of the context of discrimination and self-imposed distance of Travellers from the benefits of normal services.

It was planned that a programme of training and dialogue would be initiated to include major stakeholders and would run in tandem with the establishment of the ADR Service. This programme would be aimed at building the capacity of local actors to deliver conflict management interventions and at creating receptivity to taking a holistic approach to dealing with conflict. Given the limited amount of money available, the replacement of projected training modules, which had come with an expensive price-tag, was left to the initiative of the management working group, made up of one member each of WEP and HSE as well as the two mediators. Impressive results have been achieved to date without added expenditure (see *Chapter 9*).

### ADR

Both research and local experience contributed to the view that an effective response to conflict required a combined approach bringing together a mediation/conflict resolution approach with a clear policing and enforcement strategy.

The following rationale was advanced by MTCMI steering group for an ADR intervention:

- Neither the Traveller community nor those working with/supporting Travellers currently have the capacity/skills to manage and resolve the underlying conflict;
- The conflict is affecting many people including the Traveller community itself, and their neighbours in public and private housing estates, the business community etc.;
- There are real costs associated with the conflict e.g. policing, county council staff time, repairs to property etc., and there is the ongoing cost of doing nothing;

- Policing by the gardai, in the absence of an integrated approach can be of a fire brigade nature and concerned with containing a particular event rather than in dealing with the underlying causes;
- Traveller women, and particularly those in community leadership roles, have long recognised the need to manage or at least work around the conflict even if there is not the same commitment to this approach among Traveller men;
- Securing 'buy-in' from Traveller men will be a significant issue and there will be a need to identify ways to incentivise those in conflict to address their issues through a conflict management and resolution service;
- Individual Travellers who want an end to conflict and feuding find that it is not always safe to take a stand against those who drive the conflict;
- There is a limited understanding among stakeholders of their role in removing the key causes of conflict or that by failing to engage with this issue they are effectively colluding with those who drive and derive benefit from the conflicts.

### Regional Cooperation

As stated previously, family inter-relationships were spread over the region and, while disputes also extended beyond the region, the four counties formed a relatively coherent unit, where it was considered possible to take positive action. The existence of the TIGs made it relatively easy to establish a regional steering structure for the initiative with access to personnel from the main statutory agencies as well as community organisations working with Travellers. There was also an understanding among proponents of the initiative that, both for purposes of attracting funding and engaging statutory organisations, a regional focus was optimal.



## Chapter 7:

# MTCMI Gets Underway

Following on from the assumptions outlined in the previous section, the steering group set a remit for the mediators, composed of two complementary objectives:

- To attempt interventions in association with relevant Travellers and agencies when incidents flare, develop contacts and early warning procedures, work with accused and convicted to try to avoid escalation, work with elders etc. to manage future episodes, support garda intervention which counteracts violence in the Traveller community, support those traumatised by violent disputes and
- To embed anti-violence attitudes and develop community management skills around disputes; and to develop interagency involvement in practices underlying the promotion of a stable Traveller culture as well as appropriate service delivery.

### Launch

The MTCMI initiative was finally launched in Mullingar in September 2009. It was given coverage in the national media. This level of coverage for a relatively minor regional event reflected societal concern over the scale of Traveller violence during the Summer months. Earlier radio reports on the morning of the launch, referring to the 2008 Research, focused solely on Traveller perceptions of garda bias, giving a very unbalanced view of the research findings. These reports preceded the actual event, which took place later in the morning and had the potential to derail the initiative before it began, by alienating gardaí, who had been very supportive throughout and without whom the process had no chance of success. Although there was undoubtedly disquiet at the lack of balance and the emphasis on negativity in a process which all those involved had viewed with optimism, fortunately, the strength of interagency relationships forged during the long lead-in period was sufficient to overcome any negative reactions. Nevertheless, it was a salutary lesson in the importance of maintaining transparent processes and gave an indication of the level of diplomacy and awareness that would be required of the mediators, once they began work.

There were also wider community issues raised at the launch, in relation to areas such as education and accommodation, which may have added to the concern of a number of those associated with funding and supporting the project that the initiative might become unfocussed, resulting in diversion towards a more conventional community development intervention, which would inevitably include Traveller advocacy, thus reducing mediator neutrality, a key component of conflict management. However, the steering group was alert to such a danger and, along with the mediators, once they were employed, made clear their decision to impose clear limits on the type of requests to which mediators could respond.

### The Mediators

The mediator jobs were advertised in October and interviews took place in November. Employment criteria were

- Traveller awareness;
- work experience around interagency approaches and
- mediation awareness.

A male and female mediator commenced work at year-end.

Joe Mc Grath, a former army commandant, had great experience in managing conflict in Kosovo, Liberia, Lebanon and Israel as well as dealing with complaints in the defense forces redress of rights scheme. He held no certified qualification in mediation on commencement of employment although he had undertaken army training in conflict management. Joe had also worked as a marriage counselor and had previous experience of working with Travellers. He is currently enrolled in a Masters in Work-based Learning in Mediation Studies, delivered jointly by Queen's University and Mediation Northern Ireland.

Phyllida had formal training in mediation, having taken a number of courses, in Glencree, Winnipeg and finally, to masters level in Maynooth. She also had a degree in rural development and wide experience in community development. She too had previously worked with Travellers. Her expertise in horse management was an added advantage in working with Travellers, because of the centrality of horses to their culture.

The complementary skills and experience of the two mediators was referred to and commented on favourably by a number of those interviewed. Most importantly, the combination of Phyllida's formal mediation training and the vast experience which Joe had in conflict management was seen as bringing a rounded approach and ability to get to the heart of issues.

### First Steps

While the steering group wanted to ensure oversight, based on regular management meetings, good reporting procedures and a properly maintained record of referrals, they placed confidence from the beginning in the mediators, giving them a free hand in deciding how they would interact with clients and agencies. Such confidence was totally justified as emerged rapidly from the impact of their interventions. Day to day project monitoring was undertaken by Westmeath Employment Pact (WEP), with a management working group composed of the CEO of WEP, The Midlands HSE Traveller Health Coordinator and the mediators. Meetings took place on a weekly basis. Through WEP and HSE, Joe and Phyllida were able to quickly build up contacts and meet their intended clientele and service providers, including:

- Traveller Families in Laois, Offaly, Westmeath and Longford plus key relatives in other areas;
- Police/Legal - the Gardai, the Judiciary, the Probation Service and the Prison Service;
- Local Government - County Councils, CDBs/SIMs, Housing Sections/Officers, the four Traveller Interagency Groups, Sports partnerships, and Local Development Partnerships;

- Education: Senior Traveller Training Centres/VECs, Schools (primary and secondary), Visiting Teachers for Travellers, and Education Welfare Officers;
- Local Traveller Organisations: Laois Traveller Movement, Tullamore Traveller Movement and Longford Traveller Action Group;
- National Traveller organizations: the Irish Traveller Movement, Pavee Point and Exchange House;
- The Church;
- HSE/Traveller Health - Primary Health Care Teams in Laois, Offaly, and Longford, Traveller Men's Network and Traveller Women's Network, Family Services and Traveller Public Health Nurses.

The immediate priority for mediators was gaining the trust of the Traveller community. Based on a non-judgemental approach, transparent lack of bias or alignment and avoidance of false promises, they quickly achieved this. Their ability to build relationships with a wide variety of individuals was already evident at this early stage. It was crucial to gain the confidence of some of the central perpetrators of violence as they wielded immense influence and without powerful allies in the Traveller community, progress would necessarily have been very limited. In the first set of interviews, perpetrators described how that trust was gradually established in the face of what they described as wariness of Travellers towards members of the settled community. Without exception, when asked what was the most important element in establishing trust, they identified the absence of any false promises to reach a successful conclusion. Data from the second set of interviews indicate that continuation of trust was maintained largely by regular contact, willingness to listen non-judgementally and availability to respond to emerging conflicts as they arose.

Steering group members regularly referred to the meditational and interpersonal skills of the mediators to penetrate beyond the 'stories' put out there by perpetrators and their supporters as justification for their actions, stories which often concealed real motivations and causes of conflict and contributed to mis-directing those committed to resolving issues. It is clear from statements of Travellers interviewed that perpetrators engaged in a degree of self-analysis during contact with the mediators which contributed strongly to ultimately reaching an agreed and sustainable resolution.

Initial approaches were through the womenfolk. Meetings and focus groups in Mullingar revealed very deep trauma and, once trust of the Traveller men was secured and conversations could take place behind closed doors, it became evident that men were as traumatised as women by the violence and a willingness to resolve issues became apparent. Mediators found that participants in the conflict, despite a public stance of obduracy and aggression, had a deep desire for an end to the recurring cycle of violence. In the course of several meetings with Travellers, paralleled by establishment of good relations with a host of agency personnel, the mediation service was soon perceived by all sides to be independent, impartial and confidential. This was evident not only from steering group reports but also from the Interim Report interview data. The more recent interview data, along with the number of dispute

referrals by Travellers to the mediators, indicates that trust has been strengthened further. The mediators also established excellent relationships with the gardaí and were trusted to bring information in both directions to inform decisions without breaking confidence. The success of their work and respect in which they are held has resulted in a series of meetings with senior gardaí, including assistant commissioners to review the nature of the work and explore possibilities of adopting the ADR approach on a wider basis. One assistant commissioner has offered to meet the Traveller Women against Violence group, recognising the need to establish better relations with Travellers and the complexities of the Traveller view of gardaí.

Factors which played heavily in favour of the mediators were Phyllida's knowledge of horsemanship, because of the centrality of horses in Traveller culture, and Joe's status as a former army commandant, as several Traveller men he encountered had spent time in the army. These attributes increased their ability to secure confidence and trust.

## Referrals

As local confidence in the mediators grew, referrals began to come from a number of sources, including Travellers, gardaí, county council officials, visiting teachers for Travellers and the law courts. MTCMI steering group is aware that there are ethical issues in accepting court referrals. There is a fine line between accepting such referrals and maintaining the core value of 'voluntary participation of all parties' (see inside front cover, *core values*) but the mediators justify engaging with such referrals on the basis that those referred have the alternative option of staying with the normal mechanisms of the criminal justice route. They also take into consideration the likelihood that it is the better option for most of the parties concerned. The referrals are reviewed on a case by case basis and engagement is not pursued unless those referred demonstrate willingness and subsequent commitment to the conflict management process.

## Traveller Acceptance of MTCMI

The steering group, early on, identified a number of factors, including court sanctions, which had contributed to acceptance of the ADR intervention by Travellers:

- The intervention was welcomed in Mullingar because of effects of the riot and fear of the likely consequences as well as further fall-out;
- Traveller fatigue and readiness for intervention meant there was an open door. Travellers had already been waiting for three years for someone to intervene successfully;
- Travellers admitted that they had no mechanism for dealing with the violent conflict themselves and needed outside assistance.;
- Early establishment of trust based on the mediators' non-judgemental approach, respect for confidentiality and patent honest;
- Groundwork laid by gardaí, courts, community groups and agencies.;

- The acknowledgement by all involved of the need for broad interagency input which links socio-economic interventions with ADR;
- Quality, experience and depth of understanding of the two mediators;
- Bail, probation and threat of imprisonment hanging over perpetrators made them willing to engage with the mediators and also opened the door to the mediators to work with the gardaí and, through them, with the courts. Fear of prison had been there for seven months before mediation commenced.

### The Gender Factor

Given the more traditionalist view of gender roles within the Traveller community, some members of the steering group considered it important to have both a male and female mediator in place but there is, as yet, insufficient data to determine whether gender complementarity has been a core factor in MTCMI success to date. Some elements of the project may have been difficult to establish without the presence of a woman, e.g. the Traveller Women against Violence group. At least some of the men would not have engaged with a woman mediator around disputes; on the other hand, men involved in violent disputes have responded very positively to Phyllida, e.g. in the Recovery Group for Offenders (see p. 41) and, equally, Joe has a very good working relationship with local female Traveller community development workers and, in the original Mullingar dispute, made initial contacts with the protagonists through the womenfolk. There may well be advantages to having a gender balance but the more important consideration appears to be personal and professional qualities.

### MTCMI and an Garda Síochána

Garda response to MTCMI is uniformly positive in the interviews undertaken for this report and also in garda presentations made to the Department of Justice and Equality's national mediation seminars, 2010, which are intended to lead to a more cohesive response to Traveller conflict. The referrals being made to MTCMI also suggest that local gardaí regard MTCMI as a positive influence on conflict management. Furthermore, the courts' apparent recognition of the service as an option in relation to management of sentencing suggests that gardaí consider MTCMI to be a worthwhile step in containing damaged community relations and violent conflict, without flinching from applying the law where there is deviation from conditions or agreements. In the fourteen months of operations to date, MTCMI has encountered only one negative garda response to their intervention and that was outside the Midlands region.

Senior local gardaí have, in meetings, expressed agreement that MTCMI is not a new force attempting to subvert normal procedures. They appear to be unanimous that MTCMI supports an agreed agenda of TIGs, a majority of local Travellers and the gardaí. Superintendent Denis Shields, in a MTCMI seminar (September, 2010) in Tullamore, stated that, previously, gardaí felt they were the only agency responding but that, because of MTCMI with its interagency management structure, now other sectors were involved with which gardaí could cooperate closely, such as education, social welfare, accommodation and health. He also made the point that along with all the normal policing duties, gardaí

were expected to mediate but now they had a dedicated support in this area. He stated that, from a garda perspective, it was the way forward.

The superintendent's views were supported during MTCMI meetings with the two assistant Commissioners whose areas of responsibility jointly cover the MTCMI area of core operations. While their role clearly is not one of social development, gardaí see the ADR intervention as supportive of garda objectives of crime prevention and community policing.

## Chapter 8:

# Impact of MTCMI Conflict Intervention

### Maintaining the Peace

In Mullingar, sentencing for those involved in the Dalton Park riots of the previous year took place in February 2010. All pleaded guilty. As reported in the media: *“At Mullingar Circuit Court today, 62 men and one woman received suspended sentences of between one and four years, while two teenage girls were given 150 hours community service in lieu of a six month prison sentence.”* (Irish times, 24-2-2010, Suspended Sentences over Mullingar Riot).

Sentencing was met with jubilation by those convicted, in scenes which at least some of them afterwards regretted, attributing their behavior to relief at not going to prison. The lenient sentencing was poorly received by the media in general. Many Travellers, including those who had been victims of the violence were appalled, along with the majority of the settled community, feeling that justice had not been served. Engaging with the mediation service was not set as a condition of bail but the court was aware of the service in making its decision. This brought an adverse reaction to the mediation service from a number of quarters as its presence was seen, maybe correctly, as a key element of the thinking behind the court’s decision.

Over a year later, the peace has since held and there is no doubt that MCTMI has been an important contributor towards sustaining it, maintaining a very close relationship with all the major players. Importantly, the mediators have resisted all attempts to induce them to act as advocate for any party in the courts or to intercede with the gardaí in relation to criminal behaviour. The mediators and steering group stress that it is not their intention to interfere with law enforcement but that their primary concern remains conflict resolution and, where it is considered appropriate by other services, they are prepared to work with those concerned to achieve it.

Nevertheless, there is a risk in trying to influence or manage behaviour in such an unstable environment. An incident subsequently occurred outside the Mullingar region, where members of the family of one of the prime perpetrators attacked a young man from the opposite side. There was a real possibility that it would lead to a breakdown of the peace. The mediation service was informed and, following intervention, the situation was contained. However, the incident fed the fears of those who felt that, while bail, instead of jail, might lead to containment of violence in the court’s jurisdiction, it would only serve to displace it to other parts of the country. At the time of writing, no further evidence of displacement of violence has come to light and the friction in some of the relationships has been diminished, according to the evidence given by some of the main perpetrators. That this incident and other less explosive situations, which have since arisen, have been contained is due, in no small way, to the trust that the families, including the major perpetrators, now place in the mediators.

The comments of Traveller individuals who were heavily involved or closely affected by the spate of violence from 2008 indicate how firmly trust was established:

- 'This town was never as quiet; the lads are getting on better than ever';
- 'Only for Joe, we'd be lost';
- 'There was trust for Joe from the beginning. He was honest from the beginning';
- 'Since Joe came to Mullingar, there are no arguments. Everyone is friends again';
- 'Everyone has respect for Phyllida';
- 'The mediation service is wonderful. Their presence is really important. Men don't jump in straight away any more. Joe Mc Grath is the best thing that happened to Mullingar';
- 'There was never money better spent'.

*(A more comprehensive list of quotations from interviewees is available in appendix 1.)*

A further violent dispute occurred in Mullingar in Summer 2010 but it was unrelated to the major dispute of the previous Summer. Because it attracted media attention, it is worth noting that, as reported by the steering group and confirmed by garda:

- None of the families involved in the Dalton Park Riot of 2007 were involved nor were any of the individuals who subsequently received suspended sentences;
- Families who have actively engaged with the MTCMI used their influence to contain the situation and encourage those in dispute to use the MTCMI;
- Gardaí in Mullingar kept MTCMI fully apprised of their perspective, and, while policing the dispute, urged the parties to use MTCMI;
- The level of violence is nowhere as high, the numbers involved no where as many, and the situation nowhere as volatile, as in 2007.

The mediators, although they found that the families in question were not ready to resolve their dispute, played a significant role in gaining suspension of immediate hostilities with the families involved and assisted in avoiding serious violence. A subsequent murder of a member of one of the families led to a very threatening situation in Autumn 2010, where reinforcements were mobilized on both sides from outside the region but a combined intervention by gardaí and mediators led to leaders on both sides signing an agreement to keep the peace. The reinforcements were dispersed and at the time of writing, the peace holds.

Both mediators have to date intervened in a number of other Midland Traveller disputes that were far less high-profile in that they did not attract media attention, but were no less stressful for those involved. They have also put considerable time and effort into trying to resolve Traveller/agency disputes, often around accommodation and education (*See appendix 2*).



## Conflict Intervention Outside the Midlands

MTCMI has been increasingly called on to intervene in disputes in other parts of the country.

In May 2010, it became involved in a difficult and long-running accommodation dispute in Dublin involving Travellers, illegally occupying council lands. The proposed solutions were identified by a national Traveller organisation as having potentially life-threatening results for the family involved, because of previous disagreements with families who would be their close neighbours following the imposed solution. The mediators were unstinting in their efforts there, in addition to their normal work, and, working as a team, displayed courage and tenacity in very difficult circumstances. The MTCMI steering committee has also been supportive of the mediators and has contributed time and resources to helping with a resolution, on a humanitarian basis, even though it is outside the geographical area of the four TIGs involved in the project. At the time of writing, no agreed resolution has been arrived at, although an interim solution which is acceptable to opposing parties has emerged. In the medium term, if agreement holds, it is a real success story, given the extreme differences and entrenched positions which were first encountered by the MTCMI mediators. MTCMI is no longer formally involved but the Travellers involved in the dispute continue to rely on them for advice.

MTCMI has since been called on by Travellers to intervene in a number of disputes and, while they have responded where possible, they have had to sometimes turn down the invitation, through lack of capacity. They have also been called on by gardaí to become involved, outside the area, in two major inter-Traveller disputes, one on the east coast, the other stretching south and west across the country, affecting several families. They are increasingly called on for advice, to make visits and phone calls, go to meetings and discuss cases with a variety of players – all in addition to the training and capacity building work that they undertake.

Other serious violent disputes, extending far beyond the Midlands, have erupted in the past six months and have received media coverage. MTCMI, working in tandem with Travellers and gardaí, has been effective in minimizing the consequences of the fall-out in all cases. A key element in that success has been their relationship with Travellers involved in the earlier disputes they dealt with. Some of the 'elders' involved wield considerable influence and, in addition to getting introductions for the mediators to the warring factions, are able to reinforce their message. These short few paragraphs give little indication of the immense effort that has been put into resolving major violent disputes by MTCMI. Suffice it to say that the high regard in which the mediators are held by both Travellers and gardaí reflects the value of their work in these cases. The lack of news in relation to these serious disputes suggests that, at a minimum, cycles of reprisal have been broken and it is highly likely that serious personal injury has been avoided and even that lives have been saved.

It is worth re-calling that there are only two mediators and two other members of the working management group – both of whom can devote only a portion of their working time to MTCMI. The workload and the multiple roles of the mediators appear to be entirely unsustainable at this level, in the long-term, without provision of an office-based manager to coordinate communications and operations. Given the precarious financial position of Westmeath Employment Pact, the current managerial,

administrative and practical supports contributed by its CEO, Larry Fullam, of such importance to the project's progress and sustainability, could be lost.

### **Social Networking Interventions**

The All Ireland Health study (2010) refers to the current and potential value of social networking for reducing isolation of Travellers and helping extended families to keep in touch but social networking, unfortunately, also plays an inflammatory role in disputes. An important intervention, related to an escalating dispute, was made by gardaí in Autumn 2010, when they had inflammatory postings removed from Bebo, following MTCMI representations. Facebook, because of its invitation procedures, is far more difficult to monitor but the potential for social networking to instantly undermine conflict negotiations is one which Travellers, mediators and gardaí need to unite in confronting. Vigilance and continuing cooperation of Travellers and an Garda Síochána will be necessary to counter the negative effects of social networking attacks on individuals and families.

## Chapter 9:

### Impact of Training and Capacity Building

Given the limited personnel available to MTCMI, its efforts in relation to training and capacity building, conducted side by side with conflict interventions, have been remarkable. A number of different initiatives, responding to need and building on opportunity, have been embarked upon, locally, regionally and nationally. While, for Travellers, there have been broad personal and community development elements involved in the capacity building undertaken by MTCMI, the main focus has been on understanding sources and patterns of conflict and managing personal, family and community involvement. For those delivering services, the training emphasis has been on understanding the factors that contribute to barriers for Travellers accessing services. It should be stressed that this work could not have been carried out without commitment of all four members of the management working group.

#### Regional and National Seminars

MTCMI has, in the past year, held three regional seminars on health, accommodation and education, drawing on the experience of invited guest speakers and local experts. Participants also took part in workshop activities. All seminars had large attendances. The health and accommodation seminars had a cross-sectoral regional audience, which included Travellers, as well as community organisation and statutory sector personnel. Both had over sixty attendees. The education seminar was almost totally composed of Travellers, with over seventy attending. In all seminars, factors affecting Traveller disadvantage in relation to services was the primary focus. The seminars were very effective in laying out problems affecting Traveller life, barriers to good inter-community relations, barriers to effective service delivery and factors which contribute to Traveller conflict within the community and with service providers. These seminars were also very important for conveying to regional participants the values and working practices of MTCMI and the level of interagency cooperation required and expected from those delivering services, in order to effect positive change in Traveller life and inter-community relationships.

MTCMI also made a major contribution to each stage of the national conflict management consultation process undertaken in 2010 by the Department of Justice and Equality. Superintendent Denis Shields and the two mediators made presentations on conflict management to large numbers of gardaí, Travellers and community and statutory agency personnel working with Travellers. MTCMI hosted the final stage of the process in November 2010 – a focus group of Travellers involved with or affected by violence. This seminar was notable for the extent to which Traveller participants named and discussed potential responses to negative behaviours which contribute to prolonging in-fighting within the community.

#### MTCMI Division of Labour

The greater emphasis on Joe in comments made by Travellers in relation to conflict management is a reflection of his location in Mullingar and Longford where disputes were in progress that involved large numbers of Travellers but also, to some extent, reflects the different approaches being undertaken during the process. Overall, there had been, in the initial stages, a greater emphasis in Phyllida's work on

capacity building around conflict management and re-integration of offenders into society. This division of labour was not, by any means, absolute and not necessarily one chosen by the mediators or the steering group. Both mediators were and continue to be entirely committed to the dual approach of active mediation and capacity building of travellers and agencies to avoid and manage disputes. As the initiative has progressed, there has been greater role convergence with both mediators taking very active parts in both dispute intervention and capacity building. There has also been considerable input into capacity building by the two other members of the management working group, who have taken part in the organisation of events and delivery of training..

The actions listed in *Appendix 2*, a work record from relatively early on in the project, give an idea of the scale and diversity of actions already being undertaken in the early stages of the project under the dual approach. Both training and conflict interventions have multiplied significantly since then.

The main capacity building and training actions are outlined below:

- **The Recovery Group for Offenders**

The *Recovery Group for Offenders*, which Phyllida facilitates, along with Fergal Fox (HSE and management working group member) managed to engage and retain the eight Traveller men involved, despite existing disputes between some of them. Six of the men were on bail, one worked with MTCMI as part of his probation hours and one had received a suspended sentence and took part on foot of a letter from the court to MTCMI. There is definitive evidence of attitude change, with some Traveller men expressing a real desire to move on from settling disputes by fighting, despite initially stating that it was part and parcel of how they lived. The men have continued to participate together despite acknowledged and deeply embedded differences. One of the group has convincingly declared his intention to avoid criminality and violence and has made reparation to the victim of his crime. Another has been involved in trying to solve disputes. Yet another has shown by his refusal to take any further part in an ongoing dispute that he has stepped away from violence. The participant who was on probation worked closely with Phyllida and Fergal and was instrumental in setting up the Horsemanship Group (see below). More recently, one of the men, who had previously advocated violence as a necessary part of resolving disputes, has not only renounced this approach but appears ready to put his standing with other men on the line by helping to establish a Men against Violence group. Regardless of whether this comes to fruition, the level of attitude change has been remarkable, with an acceptance, among some of the group at least, that the greater courage is to refuse to be drawn into violence. That such an impact can be made in such a short space of time is a piece of important learning in the face of commonly held views that violence is inherent to Traveller behaviour.

While two of the men appear not to have changed behaviour in any way, the impact achieved demonstrates the benefits of engaging with men involved in violence, in a structured environment, around alternative behaviours, trauma and the effects of violent behaviour on themselves and others.

- **Fundamental Skills in Peace-making and Mediation**

This programme has now completed its second phase.

The 22.5 hour first module, *Fundamental Skills in Peace-making and Mediation*, designed by Phyllida and delivered over nine weeks to 17 Traveller attendees drawn from the four counties, made notable progress in terms of building confidence, encouraging self-examination and achieving attitude change in relation to engaging with statutory agencies. Half of that group declared themselves more than willing to take part in a more advanced module along with gardaí, county council and other personnel from statutory agencies.

The primary purpose of the second module, of similar duration to the first, was to instil mediation skills. Participants interviewed subsequently were very appreciative of the course format and content and felt they had acquired very useful skills. One garda felt he had acquired a new and very useful range of communicative techniques which would be of great benefit in his work.

A further purpose was to improve relations between the participant Travellers, gardaí and other statutory sector participants and to build networks. The module was successful in achieving this, also. In the penultimate session, the attendees were unanimous that they wanted to continue contact through a network, once the course was finished. Procedures to maintain the network are currently being established. Those involved in the course who were subsequently interviewed, both Traveller and settled, spoke of their greater understanding of the other community and felt that their ease of cross-community communication had significantly improved. One garda formed a firm friendship with a Traveller on the course.

One Traveller participant, who completed the course, said that, while she did not yet see herself as having sufficient skills to carry out mediation, she had acquired considerable life skills from the course, felt she could make a difference in diverting others from making angered responses and had acquired a much better understanding of where people working in the statutory sector were coming from.

A garda participant reported that she had learned a lot about the disadvantages that affect Travellers in their daily lives, had established good relationships with Travellers on the course and could now pick up the phone to some of the Traveller course participants to ask for advice.

One male Traveller on the course has recently become involved in trying to mediate Traveller family disputes and was highly praised by a community garda sergeant, who said that, as a result of working together, he had far greater access to Travellers and could interact in a far more positive context than ever before.

An interesting development which resulted from the training was the establishment of a mixed Traveller-settled social group in one of the Midlands towns by a participating garda, who felt that there was much to be gained in terms of mutual understanding.

- **The Traveller Women against Violence Group**

This group, established fairly recently in Mullingar, has attracted a very large membership, with close to forty women, young and old, including mothers and teenage daughters, from different and often opposed family groupings attending. While the meetings are very informal, there is a focus on moving away from violence. The group also functions as a social outlet and an opportunity for life skills training. Two of the attendees spoke very positively of their experience in attending, mentioning the inter-generational composition of the group, the opportunity of meeting and chatting (given the absence of opportunities for Travellers to meet socially) and the joint activities, such as patchwork quilt making, that they had agreed to commence.

One spoke of the confidence that she had gained in speaking out against violence and said that, even if the men did not realise it, the women were often in a position to call the shots. When questioned during interviews about the impact they might have on men's behaviour in relation to violence, they were clear that they did indeed wield influence. As one woman put it, "They think they rule the roost but, in the end, they do what we tell them." Another spoke of how important it was that, Traveller women be seen to be grouping together against violence, particularly in Mullingar, where Travellers are often perceived as being violent by nature, because of previous riots involving a number of families. Travellers in general, the women felt, might be viewed in a better light when they were seen to stand up for peace.

The group is convened by MTCMI along with two Traveller community development workers who are very active within their community. Interestingly, there was some confusion among those interviewed as to who was leading the group – even though attendees were aware of the presence of MTCMI personnel and the convenors. This suggests, given the progress towards organising joint activities and the fact that several of the women stay on beyond the end of the meeting to drink tea and chat, that they have taken full joint ownership of the group and can easily make it self-sustaining.

A second group is currently being established in Athlone.

- **The Horsemanship Group**

The *Horsemanship Group*, established by Phyllida in Tullamore, has attracted considerable interest from Traveller men. Its activities have been boosted by Travellers renting land for horses, made available to them by Offaly County Council. The learning involved and potential to improve historically difficult relationships between the council and Travellers is considerable. While the Recovery and Peace-making projects need no justification as part of a conflict management initiative, the Tullamore Horseman Project appears, on the surface, to be outside of the remit of a mediation initiative, moving into the domain of community development. Indeed, some of its objectives are exactly what would be expected of a community development project: developing potential for gaining employment, animal welfare and horsemanship, health and safety promotion and so on. But the horse project

established in Tullamore has more pressing objectives of intervening in conflict through building teamwork between opposing Traveller men and promoting relationships between the Traveller men and the local authority, which were historically problematic. It is to the credit of the local authority that it has proved to be surprisingly open to getting involved in making land available for rent to Travellers for horses (given the resistance in other areas of the country) and to the credit of Travellers concerned, that they have also proved to be willing to meet reasonable financial commitments towards rent (again often resisted elsewhere). A further focus of the project has been to increase Travellers' understanding of legal issue involved for themselves and the council, a lack of which has often been a cause of Travellers disengaging from negotiations and feeling that they have been the victims of discrimination.

The project also answers to a demand strongly made by one of the mediators that Traveller development projects need to be practical, answer to their needs, and be 'real', i.e. be likely to lead to an outcome which will positively affect their future.

A development worker post to manage the group is currently being advertised.

- **Peer Mediation Training in School**

A *Peer Mediation Training* course is underway in a medium-sized Midlands second-level school. It involves training of both teachers and pupils. The school population includes 25% Travellers and a substantial proportion of foreign nationals as well as settled local pupils. All pupils have been briefed about the purpose of the training and have voted to choose participants on the basis of trustworthiness, ability to keep a secret and those most likely to command respect. Following the vote, eight children are now commencing training. Six teachers are separately involved in training. Response from participants to date is positive. The training is a very important step towards the original aim of the mediators and MTCMI steering group in concentrating on keeping Traveller children in education, regardless of disagreements and disputes.

- **Conflict in the Workplace**

A HSE funded workshop for managers and key staff of organisations funded through the HSE Traveller Health Unit took place recently on the theme of conflict in the workplace. Given the impact of conflict on the capacity of Traveller advocacy groups and of organisations in which Travellers work or receive training this is potentially a very important development.

The HSE which is a significant funder of Traveller organisations and projects in the Midlands is anxious that the groups it funds deliver their agreed programmes of work and that they develop approaches for coping with and minimising the impact of conflict on their work. It has invited all its funded groups to take part in a series of workshops to be delivered by the MTCMI with a view to building their capacity to cope with conflict. Feedback from the initial workshop indicates that few of these organisations have addressed the issue of conflict in a systematic fashion, that it is not easy for them to do so but all are aware of just how easily

their work can be derailed by an outbreak of violence severely limiting their impact and reducing their ability to deliver services.

All six programmes are contributing to sustainable conflict management in that, ultimately, local Travellers and agency personnel need to be in a position to manage local disputes, without outside intervention.

### Interagency Impact

The project steering group has found that the initiative has already led to increased collaboration between the partners. This was corroborated during research interviews. The level of collaboration between the gardaí and the local authority in Westmeath, for example, which was driven initially by the urgency of the situation, expanded to include mechanisms to exchange information with other agencies, largely through the steering group, illustrating the advantage of operating in an interagency context.

As the project progressed, the mediators, who had made it their business to establish contact across agencies, became increasingly supportive of an interagency response, not only for its value in maximising resources, minimising waste and reducing violence caused by lack of agency receptivity to Traveller needs, but also because it draws Travellers into working alongside agency personnel and increases their capacity to deal directly with service providers, thus decreasing dependency and allowing them to take greater control of their own affairs. It is important to stress that the onus to develop this process rests on the statutory sector.

### Impact on Traveller Men

The physical and mental health of Traveller men and the far greater rate of male suicide in the Traveller community – six times that of the settled population - is a particular focus of the *All Ireland Traveller Health Study* (2010). An unintended but very beneficial consequence of MTCMI work has been the access gained to Traveller men and particularly those Traveller men who remained most remote from standard service provision such as the health services. That access has come through connections made during MTCMI dispute interventions and through the training they have organised, which frequently engages Travellers who have been engaged in traumatic disputes or/and criminal activities and are among those most at risk of self-harm. The HSE Traveller Health Unit is very impressed at the increased access that has been provided to this cohort of Traveller men through the operations of the mediators.

Gardaí, from Chief Superintendent level down to community gardaí have made the same observations in relation to their access to groups of Traveller men with whom they would previously have had no possibility of forming a positive relationship.



## Chapter 10:

# Summary of Outcomes

The following is a summary of outcomes achieved by MTCMI to date, fully cross-checked by Pobal (other than work with the prison service) and supported by interview data and general communication throughout the past fourteen months with many of the players involved:

### *Interventions*

- MTCMI has engaged with Travellers across the Midlands in response to their requests as well as managing the major dispute most responsible for its formation;
- MTCMI is well regarded and trusted by Travellers who have accessed it. Several clients have promoted the service to other Travellers;
- Requests for assistance and support have subsequently come from Travellers and gardaí outside the Midlands;
- Travellers outside the Midlands have been willing to engage with MTCMI, even when the request for intervention has not been from Travellers (e.g. from an Garda Síochána).

### *Training*

- Travellers have taken part in Mediation Training and have begun putting their learning to good use;
- A Women Against Violence Group has been established in Mullingar with scope for a Men's Group in the near future. Another women's group is being convened in Athlone, shortly;
- MTCMI has provided training on request to Traveller organisations and TIGs;
- Through its involvement with the Recovery Group for Offenders, Traveller Men and the Traveller Men's Health Network, MTCMI has identified the potential for a number of interventions around horses in Laois, Offaly and Westmeath;
- There has been progress towards work with Traveller Men in the areas of Violence/Domestic Violence – with some funding in the HSE to support this work;
- Access to Traveller men has been improved for HSE and gardaí;
- Two Traveller men are now involved with MTCMI in relation to case work around violence and are also making interventions of their own;
- Through the HSE Traveller Health Unit funded Women's network, MTCMI has promoted its objectives, secured referrals and recruited women for mediation training;
- MTCMI has secured the buy-in of pupils and teachers in a Midlands second level school to engage in peer-mediation training;

- MTCMI has facilitated information exchange between Travellers and service providers in the community and statutory sector in separate seminars, attended by up to eighty participants from the four counties, in relation to accommodation and education. A seminar for gardaí, based in the four counties, in relation to Travellers will take place in June;
- MTCMI has been requested by the Garda Assistant Commissioner for the Western Division to deliver a series of training sessions to young gardaí and is about to do so shortly in four western counties.

### **Professional Relationships and Referrals**

- A good working relationship has been established between the local gardaí and MTCMI, with referrals from gardaí to MTCMI. This has expanded, as contact has been established with gardaí further afield. A number of meetings have been held with senior gardaí. More recently, requests from gardaí for MTCMI intervention have come from other areas;
- Referrals have also come from public health nurses, social workers, visiting teachers for Travellers and a range of other personnel. This work is detailed in Phyllida and Joe's casework reports;
- A good working relationship has been established with the Probation Service, which is represented on the MTCMI Steering Group, with some referrals from the Service to the MTCMI;
- Local district and Circuit Court justices have been informed of the current and potential role of MTCMI. ;
- A good relationship has been established with the Prison Service. In particular, Phyllida has met with the Governor of the Midlands Prison in relation to face to face work in Portlaoise. Joe has also had contact with the service and his interventions have helped to have a number of offenders transferred to assist with particular mediation actions;
- Relationships with local authority housing sections vary. MTCMI has mediated in cases between Travellers and local authorities and has been invited to intervene in disputes by some of the local authorities;
- Referrals have come from Traveller organisations and front-line statutory workers ;
- Traveller Interagency Groups exist in Longford, Westmeath and Laois – all are aware of and supportive of the MTCMI and vice versa. As the TIG is inactive in Offaly, the CDB performs a similar function there.

A relationship which has so far failed to live up to expectations is that with the Catholic Church. Early meetings with clergy, which it was hoped would lead to forming an alliance with a positive force for peace led to nothing and proved a source of disappointment. A high standing for the Church in relation to potential conflict management had been assumed in the *2008 Research* because of the commitment of the majority of Travellers to practicing their religion but, in practice, clergy who were

approached were either unable or unavailable to respond, although they did express their goodwill. Despite their faith, Travellers, encountered by MTCMI, do not appear, in general, to have great trust in, or any intimate relationship with local clergy, with a few notable exceptions. It should be noted, however, that MTCMI and the Parish of the Travelling People have formed a mutually beneficial relationship.

### **Seminars**

- MTCMI has delivered seminars to statutory and community players and Travellers in the Midlands on the theme of conflict in relation to accommodation and education with local and guest expert speakers;
- It has participated fully in and has been a key contributor to the Department of Justice and Equality-led national seminars in 2010 which investigated options in relation to managing Traveller violence;
- It has held seminars for TIGs in its own locality and, by invitation to TIGs outside its immediate area.

## **CHAPTER 11:**

## Challenges and Barriers

The MTCMI project has been in existence for just over a year but has already made substantial contribution towards conflict management and mediation in the Midlands and further afield, as well as engaging in fire-fighting in some very serious disputes which have arisen during that period. However, it faces a number of serious challenges, including funding, and there is still a need for caution in evaluating its long-term impact.

The *Horsemanship* and *Recovery for Offenders* programmes have been praised by Travellers, council officials and gardaí alike. Progress in capacity building around conflict understanding and management has been impressive. For Travellers, it has gone beyond awareness and understanding of conflict and mediation to practical application of skills transmitted during training seminars. For those working with Travellers, who attended the same seminars and often built close relationships with the Traveller attendees, it has allowed the positive side of Traveller life to emerge and has given real insight into the difficulties experienced by travellers in dealing with services.

Based on the opinion of those interviewed for this report, the capacity of the mediators to make a substantial impact on disputes is not in doubt. While the *Interim Report* was correct in stating that interventions always remain subject to volatile elements outside the control of the mediators and outside their geographical area - and therefore not subject to agreements arrived at in the course of resolution agreements – the increase in mediator knowledge of the broader Traveller inter-connections along with their movers and shakers, their growing access to the advice of senior gardaí and their access to Traveller leaders have all contributed to the likelihood of interventions leading to a sustained impact on disputes, supported by a network of people who can respond swiftly to agreement breaches.

Making such a major contribution towards keeping the peace in very difficult situations has indeed been a major achievement but the project is faced with serious challenges:

- At the time of writing, MTCMI is under serious threat financially despite the Department of Justice and Equality funding which covers something less than 50% of its operations, unless it succeeds in its recent application for European funding or another funding source comes to the rescue. The importance of overcoming immediate funding problems cannot be overstated because of the initiative's impact and its potential for insertion/replication nationwide. It would clearly be of huge benefit to establish the project on a more secure financial footing in the long-term;
- In the course of the initiative, several Travellers engaging with MTCMI have received suspended sentences. There is a strong perception on the part of gardaí, the settled community and Travellers not involved in disputes that this is not a fair or appropriate outcome; that no one should be allowed to walk free from criminality or violence and that offenders owe reparation to society. MTCMI is aware that failure to respond to this perception could undermine its work by increasing tensions between communities and within the Traveller community. For this reason, it has put considerable effort, during the latter

phase of the initiative, into exploring restorative justice methodologies with the intent to incorporate it into their interventions. The Department of Justice and Equality, in conjunction with MTCMI intend to explore practice and opportunities in relation to implementation of restorative justice approaches in the course of 2011;

- Initial conversations between mediators and Travellers involved in and affected by disputes revealed a deep concern about inflicting lasting damage on the next generation. It had been hoped to tie education and particularly attendance at school into direct interventions, given stated Traveller parent worries about the future of their children, but this proved to be a step too far and has had to be shelved for the moment. The need for attitude change in this respect remains a particular concern of MTCMI. It recently held a seminar for over eighty Traveller adults and parents on the issue and is currently undertaking a staff and student peer mediation training intervention in a secondary school with a large Traveller population. Although at an early stage, the school training has been highly lauded by the teacher most closely associated with it. The mediators and MTCMI steering group are very aware that sustained improvements in conflict management will only be achieved through an inter-generational approach because of the nature of Traveller feuding and children's education and attitude formation are central to a successful outcome;
- The mediators have found the prevalence of drugs to be far greater than expected and have found an enormous impact on the well-being and security of the Travellers they are dealing with. In their estimation, it is undermining development work of all kinds as well as leading to major individual trauma. Some of the dealers involved are major players on the national stage and the high stakes involved may ultimately trump any dispute agreements;
- The qualities of the mediators paradoxically present a challenge to replication of the initiative in other locations. Quotes from interviews (*Appendix 1 and 2*) leave no doubt as to the high esteem in which they are held. The commitment, availability and willingness of the mediators to work far beyond agreed hours was stressed by Tullamore-based garda superintendent, Fergus O Dwyer, among others, and such commitment, allied to comparable ability, may not be easy to source elsewhere;
- There are many calls on the mediators to use their experience and skill to solve difficulties which have nothing to do with conflict and to advocate for Travellers who lack confidence in dealing with service providers. It is very difficult for the mediators to set boundaries to their work in an area where there are, in the words of a steering committee member, '*so many diverse needs, so messy*'. This is a particular challenge which needs to be faced so that their work remains focussed on mediation and manageable in size;
- Mediators are involved in a difficult and emotionally intense activity. They are frequently called on to make important decisions with unpredictable consequences. While the element of MTCMI teamwork has been helpful in managing stress and the support of the management

working group has been exemplary, it should be a focus of the wider steering group to ensure that adequate emotional support and debriefing mechanisms are available to the mediators;

- The local Traveller interagency Groups are among the most important supportive structures of the initiative. Without question, a diminution in their activities would damage the amplitude of the work that it has been possible for MTCMI to engage in. These groups are currently under some threat because of reduced capacity in the public sector. Offaly appears to have disbanded its TIG and, while the County Development Board remains supportive of MTCMI and Offaly representatives continue to participate on the steering group, the close focus on Traveller issues provided by a functioning TIG is no longer available. Its absence limits MTCMI access to statutory agencies in Offaly and also poses a threat to sustainable regional cooperation.;
- There is a problem sometimes with agency openness to responding to MTCMI interventions. Although the mediators are absolutely committed to an interagency approach as the only way of dealing with problems and of increasing Traveller capacity to play a more active part in making decisions about their own future, they have on a number of occasions encountered agency personnel who have been uncooperative and even obstructive. Fortunately, this is the exception but it highlights difficulties which can impede progress and which can be best dealt with in an interagency environment. In one county, it has not proved possible to progress accommodation issues; in another, it proved impossible to make progress with serious education barriers affecting a particular family. However, when the gatekeeper changed, in the latter instance, a whole new range of possibilities opened up. It is important to note that the mediators are well aware of the trauma suffered by some agency personnel in their dealings with some Travellers in the past and do not act as advocates for Travellers in disputes with local authorities but as dispute mediators.

It should be noted that, in contrast to the examples mentioned above, the mediators have pointed to the commitment of agency personnel in general as a key factor in their success to date.

- Management of the project needs continuity, as experience is essential to making decisions as to management of the mediators' work organisation and the direction, scope and boundaries of the initiative. Unfortunately, Westmeath Unemployment Pact is under threat with a potential very serious loss of expertise in management of the project. This is an urgent matter for the steering group to address.;
- Referrals are coming more frequently from gardaí, as the project progresses. This puts MTCMI in a privileged position with regard to information and access but also has the potential to impact on their perceived neutrality. The role and positioning of the mediators needs to be managed carefully;
- Finally, some of the work involves fire-fighting in very serious disputes which involve what are, effectively, criminal gangs. MTCMI has had more than a little success in this work but there are ethical issues. While parties in such disputes may agree to keep the peace, there are

often serious power differentials. There can be no doubt that finding solutions which avoid damage to property, violent assaults and loss of life are to be supported but from the perspective of the less powerful, there can be an element of imposition which raises serious ethical issues in relation to mediation. Both this and the previous point in relation to garda referrals demonstrate the absolute need for a knowledgeable and active steering group which can define boundaries of the initiative and recognise and manage the different elements of conflict intervention, conflict management and mediation, supporting the mediators to intervene appropriately.

## Chapter 12:

# Value for Money and Replication

### Value for Money

While the impact on savings in service provision is not easily quantifiable, given that conflict management results in an *absence* of need for services such as policing, healthcare, council repairs, and court and probation services, it is real and substantial. Policing costs alone can be very substantial, as indicated by Superintendent Chris Delaney in relation to Waterford Traveller conflict involving a number of families in 2008, where he estimated costs at c. €400,000 over a two month period (Irish Times, 9/9/2008). It is credible that the interventions in Mullingar cost considerably more. It is certain that the peace which has been maintained between the parties involved in those disputes has saved the taxpayer far in excess of the cost of the project (c. €120,000 p.a.), before ever considering all the other interventions and actions undertaken by MTCMI.

As well as major savings in respect of outlay of Garda time and resources, there is almost certainly a substantial saving to HSE because of reduced stress, trauma and physical injury. The fall-out from conflict in terms of health and, in particular, mental health is a subject to which Travellers return again and again. The level of trauma encountered by the mediators suggests that it is not far-fetched to suppose that there are connections between the very high suicide rate among Travellers and the prevalence of internal community violence.

There are longer-term gains in the likelihood of improved school attendance and retention as a result of a safer environment owing to agreed rules of behaviour between families.

Improved interagency cooperation and training undertaken by MTCMI has potential to lead to consequent savings through service provision based on better understanding of issues.

The ultimate gain which is more important than any monetary consideration is the considerably improved personal safety environment for families and individuals involved with or affected by violence, the reduction of trauma and the benefits of a return to normality.

### Value of Current Funding

The major funders currently are the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Department of Justice and Equality.

Westmeath Employment Pact has made a lesser but substantial contribution in terms of funding, while support has also been made available by Longford Community Resources Ltd (the recently integrated local development partnership company for County Longford) and the HSE, through its Midlands Traveller Health Unit. It should be noted that, as stated previously, the support element, in terms of ideas, supervision and human resources of these organisations/agencies is a very important element in the success of this initiative.



There is also a substantial input from Pobal, acting at the request of the Department of Justice and Equality but without any additional funding, to monitor and support the initiative. The responsiveness of the Department of Justice and Equality itself to issues relating to the MTCMI initiative should not be underestimated and reflects the value it places on MTCMI activities.

The total projected cost of continuing the project, apart from overheads absorbed by WEP and HSE, across the four counties, is less than €31,000 per county p.a. By any standards of project assessment, that, combined with the quality of operational personnel and management would represent very impressive value for money; when viewed in conjunction with MTCMI conflict intervention outside their core geographical area, impacting on, among other local authority areas, Louth, Dublin City, North and South Dublin, Waterford, Wicklow and Galway, value for money is off the scale.

### Replication

There is ample evidence from the impact of the project to date that this is an intervention well worth replicating. Certainly, its claim to be a cost-saving measure is well founded. It has proved itself valuable not only in achieving remarkable results but also in its capacity to stimulate interagency collaboration. Comparable Traveller conflict situations exist in a number of other parts of the country and, while there are limits to the geographical area which any mediator can service, the method of clustering areas, adopted by MTCMI, has proved very effective in increasing capacity to engage rapidly with extended families and to increase interagency response across local authority boundaries.

However, it should be noted that this report is not suggesting that installing a mediator is, *per se*, going to result in successful conflict management. The interagency input, existence of a supportive steering group, collaboration of the gardaí, clear roles and reporting procedures of MTCMI, and teamwork of the mediators are all essential components of the model and need to be considered as fundamentals in any replication.

## Appendix 1:

### *Selected quotes from Travellers, gardaí and steering group members*

#### Traveller Perspectives

This town was never as quiet, the lads are getting on better than ever

Each side trusts him (Joe), but not at the start.

Only for Joe, we'd be lost.

Everyone has respect for Phyllida.

Years ago there were nice even-handed guards.

We're all talking since he got involved.

Somebody would have been killed but for the Guards. There were only a few of them; they didn't have to stay.

We had trust for Joe from the beginning. He was honest from the beginning.

The mediation service is wonderful. Their presence is really important. Men don't jump in straight away any more. Joe Mc Grath is the best thing that happened to Mullingar.

Since Joe came to Mullingar, there are no arguments. Everyone is friends again. At the funeral, there were 200 of us and 4 of them and we all drank together.

We tried to sort it ourselves before but not enough distance. It was going on for 4 years before Joe came.

I've done a lot of talking to stop trouble before. I'm accepted as such but I'm too close. I'd be the middle man.

The suspended sentences were right. They've given their word.

The guards took weapons but they made no arrests. There must be arrests.

With Joe, there's no bullshit, no false promises. This is what you have to do.

Those regarded as ringleaders are involved and want to be.

Joe keeps in touch. There was never money better spent.

Women get poor reception from the guards.

Interagency stuff brings people in. They ask 'what can I do here?' But it's intimidating at first to sit down with gardaí.

Young lads (Gardaí) are less approachable, the older ones knew the families.

Phyllida knows her stuff.

The problem is that the council won't allow Travellers to move to get away from rows, like they used to.

## Garda Perspectives

It's still in its infancy but anything that holds things at bay and prevents them from escalating is good. It's something we didn't have before.

There's a lot of bare knuckle fighting but since Phyllida arrived there are no repercussions.

Courts keep lid on boiling pot. Mediation puts out the fire.

Mediators played a major role before court cases also.

Joe and Phyllida are exceptional, A1.

A great resource for the Garda to have.

Lots of the young guards don't even know they're there (in one of the four counties). They need to get into Templemore to do training.

Is the mediation worthwhile?... 100%..I have a lot more access through working with xxx (Traveller mediator trained up by MTCMI) and have built up trust with the Traveller men that wasn't there before.

I've been sixteen years prosecuting Travellers involved in crime and until this I never saw myself sitting around a table with them discussing the impact of issues on their lives.

Great to have Phyllida's support when I talked to the group on the halting site. I got a different view of things.

I advised mediators from the start to maintain their independence including from the gardai. I don't expect feedback from them.

They have a very good understanding of their role.

It's way more than a job to them. They are very well regarded.

It has helped that they have a clean fresh canvas. It allows them to set the bar.

## Steering Group Perspectives

In meetings with Travellers, the safe stuff is put out first. What is presented is often not the issue. The Joe trust factor gets to the heart of the problem.

Both mediators understand the confessional aspect of the work and are able to get to underlying issues that they would not bring back to the gardaí because of implications. There is garda understanding of that distance.

When we were consulting Travellers around the revised Traveller interagency strategy, Phyllida offered to facilitate and we got much more involvement and feedback than otherwise. They opened out. She clearly knows them well.

There is no doubt that Phyllida has made a difference. She has a good relationship with the housing section.

The researchers (2008) organised garda focus groups as well as Traveller focus groups. It was very important to keep both on board. The women's focus groups revealed the huge mental stress the men were under.

The project is seen as really successful by the steering group, particularly as the mediators are being invited everywhere.

There was an open door when they started work. Fear of prison had been there for 7 months.

It took time to get Travellers onto the steering group. There was a fear that they would become the face of conflict resolution.

Denis Shields (*garda superintendent*) was crucial. He didn't need coaxing; he became a leader early on and built relationships with Travellers and agencies at management meetings.

The combination of statutory (*HSE*) and community (*WEP*) is bang on.

There is a huge interagency emphasis but there isn't full interagency buy-in, not in all the counties.

The life experience and backgrounds of mediators have made it a great initiative.

## Appendix 2:

### *Sample Work Summary from early Summer 2010*

#### **Gardaí**

1. Lines of communication and good working relationships established with the Gardai in Laois, Offaly, Westmeath and Longford
2. Gardai represented on the MTCMI Steering Group
3. Mediator working on an ongoing basis in Mullingar – liaising with Gardai
4. Mediator responded to a request by Super in Longford to intervene in a dispute
5. Mediator responded to issues in Athlone/Moate
6. Superintendent in Tullamore requested assistance/support in a serious (Non Traveller) family dispute
7. Mediator working with gardai in Laois (Portlaoise and Portarlington) concerning two ongoing cases involving violence between Travellers
8. Mediator working with gardai in Tullamore regarding Traveller feud resolution.
9. Mediators working with gardai in Dublin - Northside - regarding family occupying council land.
10. Presentation made to gardai in Dept of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Dublin
11. Presentation arranged for gardai inspectors, sergeants, superintendents and chief superintendents in Laois/Offaly

#### **Judiciary**

1. Have written to all Judges – District and Circuit – as advised by Court Service
2. Judiciary aware of the MTCMI
3. Two ongoing cases referred back to mediation by the courts.

#### **Probation Service**

1. Have met with and briefed Probation Service Officers in the Midlands
2. Supporting one probationer on community service (some with MTCMI mediation Facilitator) in Tullamore

#### **Local Authorities**

1. Local Authorities represented on the Steering Group of the MTCMI
2. Have had meeting with Housing Sections in Tullamore, Mullingar and Birr
3. Have mediated in two cases involving Housing Departments in Offaly;
4. Seminar being held in September for Local Authority Staff around approaches to conflict;
5. Need for contact with Laois County Council Housing section to be established;
6. Housing issues has been identified as a serious area for conflict with Travellers, many problems exist

#### **Sports**

1. Clear link between boxing and poor school attendance in Mullingar – a welfare issue. To be pursued with the IABA;
2. Concerns that boxing used to prepare young Traveller for conflict;
3. Supported Soccer tournament;
4. Limited involvement in other Sports – need to engage Sports Partnerships ;
5. Engaging on an ongoing basis with ten Travellers around horse management, the law relating to horses and using horses for sport – need to explore more fully the potential for Travellers and Horse in sport and conflict resolution.

### Education

1. Have linked in with the Education Welfare Board and the Visiting Teacher Service – believe education to be a critical area for change;
2. Delivering anti bullying training in one primary school;
3. Starting peer mediation training in two primary schools in September;
4. Have linked with School Completion programme in Offaly;
5. Have taken two mediation referrals from VTT in Tullamore;
6. Exploring the potential for mediating between VTT and one school in Tullamore.

### Interagency Groups

1. Have linked in with the Longford, Westmeath and Laois Traveller Inter Agency Groups
2. Need to for Inter agency group in Offaly

### Traveller Families

1. A lot of work done with Families in Longford, Westmeath, Laois and Offaly Athlone/Moate with families caught up in conflict

### Primary Health Care Teams in Laois, Offaly and Longford

1. Have met with workers, Coordinators and teams - good working relationships established.
2. Substantial number of PHC workers are now engaged as trainees with mediation and peace making training

### Mediation Training

1. 17 Traveller men and women are now engaged with mediation and peacemaking training with MTCMI

### Recovery Group

Five men on bail, probation and suspended sentence for violent offences are now attending a regular weekly group meeting aimed at addressing their issues around violence and supporting their recovery.

## Appendix 3:

### Interviews

Two sets of semi-structured interviews were conducted in the Midlands in Summer 2010 and Spring 2011, to help determine the impact of the project. The composition was as follows:

In the first set of interviews, 14 people were interviewed. The breakdown was as follows:

- Gardaí: ..... 5
- Statutory and community sectors (other than gardaí): .... 2
- Travellers: ..... 7

Of the seven Travellers: four of the Travellers interviewed were male, three female; a balance was also maintained between Travellers from Laois-Offaly, mainly serviced by one mediator and the Westmeath-Longford area, mainly serviced by the other. A total of fourteen interviews was conducted, nine in person and five by phone. In relation to the major dispute in Mullingar, Travellers on both sides of the dispute were included.

The second set had a slightly different composition to reflect the developments in the interim. Regular contact had been maintained with some of the senior gardaí interviewed in the first set, obviating the need for the same level of formal interviewing. In addition, a number of meetings had been held, in the interim, with senior gardaí, up to and including the rank of Assistant Commissioner. Their thoughts on the conflict management process and the relationship between the process and policing have been taken into account.

The Travellers selected for interview included some who had been interviewed for the *Interim Report* and some involved in subsequent disputes as well as those involved in training established or expanded since the first set of interviews by MTCMI. It was important to interview a selection of those originally interviewed to get a more long-term perspective on work in progress. The views and opinions of over twenty Travellers involved with MTCMI, who took part in an earlier national the Department of Justice and Equality -led conflict management consultation process were also taken into account.

A total of 19 persons was formally interviewed for the second set of interviews. The breakdown was as follows:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| Gardaí: .....  | 5 |
| Travellers: .....  | 8 |
| Statutory and community sectors (other than gardaí): ..... | 6 |

Feedback from those interviewed, along with the views of the twenty adult Travellers who attended the Traveller seminar on violence in Tullamore, substantially informs the report. Data obtained has been supplemented, as explained previously, by statements from participants at meetings and seminars in the course of the project.

Discussions and debriefings have taken place, also, with the mediators and management working group, on a regular basis.