

Settling in Coventry: One Family's Experience

When EMAS Settlement Officers first arrived at the small, one bedroom flat during an initial visit, they met a Roma Gypsy family from Central Europe. The parents, who spoke Russian but struggled with little English, were concerned for their children, one of whom was disabled. During this first visits, Settlement Officers (SOs) recorded personal details and checked documents to ensure the children's safety.

Both parents were enormously grateful because one of the SOs spoke Russian and it was a relief for them to be able to communicate fluently with Local Authority representatives. During this and subsequent visits the parents were helped to complete In-year Applications for school places in Coventry while the SOs also explained the school system to them.

Along with this information, the SOs routinely provided advice about other services – the Citizens' Advice Bureau, Law Centre, Refugee Centre, Social Services, benefits, Housing. This family were also advised on finding a local GP and what to expect from the service.



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It emerged that one of the children, who had severe communication difficulties, had previously attended a Special School in Central Europe. The child was therefore referred to Coventry's Special Educational Needs Service while applications were made for the other children to attend city primary or secondary schools.

The children's parents had already tried very hard to find school places for the siblings, but the language barrier and sheer logistics of the situation was a struggle; their father was working long hours while the children's mother cared for the family in the tiny, cramped flat.

The child with special needs was assessed by a teacher from the Hearing Impairment Unit. A Russian speaking SO attended this visit to help the parents understand the assessment and enable the teacher and parents to get the most out of the visit. As a result, the child was then referred to the Educational Psychology Service for a full assessment.

After several weeks the remaining children were allocated places and admitted to primary and secondary schools in Coventry. The same SO went with the parents to every admission meeting at all the schools involved in order to help both the parents and the schools understand each other's positions.

The family faced problems finding a suitable school for their child with special needs, but, when a place was eventually allocated, the SO helped with the admission meeting and explained to staff the particular challenges the child and parents were facing.



In the 6 years since the family's arrival in Coventry, the SO has received numerous phone calls and requests from schools to support their communication with the parents.

It is this trust and communication between SOs, parents and schools that is at the heart of the service.

This family grew to trust a particular SO and regarded her as a reliable and invaluable support; she

advocated for the parents when they were unable to put their case forward.

Sadly, the family's financial situation deteriorated - the parents could not afford to pay their bills and struggled to feed the children when the father lost his job. They became homeless and without any financial resources. One of the schools referred them to Social Services and a social worker has been appointed to help them to go through this difficult time.

Care for the family continues to be a combination of team work between various agencies, one of which is the EMAS Settlement Team.