

One-on-one social work

The Roma families in one part of Brussels now have a social worker all of their “own” to help them start new lives

Julie Trinquart is a young social worker in charge of 30 Roma families in the Brussels borough of Saint-Josse-ten-Noode. She works for the borough's public social welfare centre where she runs a project to encourage the social and professional integration of Roma families.

“Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, or Sint-Joost-ten-Node in Dutch, has many Roma families, most of them from the same village in Romania. They all have residency permits. Public social welfare centres in Belgium don't usually target specific communities, but the director of my centre felt the Roma were hard to reach and understand and needed more attention. My job is to help these families learn French and less often Dutch, visit a family planning unit, and take part in excursions and various activities.



Unusually, a welfare centre with a special programme for Roma

“I meet each family at least once a month, and they tell me about their problems with housing, money, or simply making themselves understood and understanding the letters or documents they may receive. They live in a neighbourhood close to Brussels' North Station, and although they pay their rents thanks to their social benefits, many landlords are suspicious and don't want them.

“These people would like to stay in Belgium and want to work here, usually as cleaning ladies or in the building industry. They want their children to go to school, they would like to improve their living standards. They don't beg and they don't engage in petty crime. They can be identified as Roma by the way they look, but on the whole they don't identify with a specific culture.

“It's only been a year so far, so the people I have been working with aren't yet ready to look for work. They're still learning to read and write. French comes more easily to them than Dutch because Romanian is a Latin language.

“I monitor how things are progressing, whether the children are attending school regularly. If there are problems we adapt our approach. I hope they'll find jobs because I firmly believe in this project. One man has now got a full time cleaning job and I hope others will follow. It's doubly hard for Roma because of stereotyping and prejudice. Some people at the family planning were at first reticent about working with Roma.

“Naturally, some of the people I work with aren't ambitious, and expect the system to help them. It's hard to do anything about that. We can't keep checks on everyone all the time. But most of the people I have got to know just want to get on with their lives.”

European Social Fund

The project, “Saint-Josse: Pilot project for the Roma population”, took place in 2012-2013 and was renewed for a second year. It aims to stimulate the social and professional development of the Roma population in a part of Brussels.