

Carrot and stick

The Dutch municipality of Nieuwegein considers that the best way to help “problem” families is to offer assistance in exchange for such commitments as making sure a child goes to school

Marijke Bosma is programme manager in the municipality of Nieuwegein, near Utrecht, where they have been running a pilot project for “complex” Roma families, or families with difficulties. She thinks the global approach, which also involves commitments from the families, has been highly effective.



The Labourplus European project was set up to find innovative ways of helping Roma and others enter the labour market

“The Netherlands in 1978 granted what we call a ‘general pardon’ to people with no official documents, allowing some to stay in the country. They asked the new municipalities to welcome these families. Nieuwegein is a new municipality, a satellite of Utrecht. We took in 17 Roma families mostly from ex-Yugoslavia, housing them at first in temporary structures, then in permanent housing. At first there were some 80 people, now the families have grown to roughly 400.

“Over the years Nieuwegein has run separate projects for Roma, some focusing on education, others on employment, etc, but they hadn’t yet taken a global approach. Things changed four years ago after a fight in a shopping mall involving Roma and non-Roma. This was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Our board of mayors and aldermen asked my department to try a new, integrated approach to everything from school dropouts to theft.

“We call it *Wissegeld*, which means loose change. Last year, in response to the European Commission’s 2011 call for national plans for Roma integration, the municipality set up a project called LabourPlus, with Nieuwegein as the lead partner among 11 partners from 9 countries, to exchange best employment practices for migrants and Roma. The idea also involved not looking at Roma and other migrants as victims. *Wissegeld* is one of those best practices.

“The programme focused on families with problems in several areas – debt, criminality, school attendance, unemployment. We took on 27 problem families with one mediator for each, whose main aim was to develop a specific plan to coordinate the different organisations already working with that family. The idea was to work on all the problems in a related fashion.

“I want to make the obvious point that multi-problem families in our municipality aren’t only Roma, but we did notice that many professionals weren’t doing a proper job with the Roma families, either because they were tired of seeing no results or because they were afraid. Our basic principle is that a Roma has the same rights and duties as every other citizen, and shouldn’t be looked at as different, so we chose to offer help and assistance but also to ask for something in return. For instance, we might help a mother go to a language course, but in return she had to bring her child to school. As with any other parents, if that didn’t work, there is a long legal process that can end in court.

“Our main success has been with education, and particularly primary school. Secondary school is more difficult, because it’s particularly hard to convince families to keep girls in school after they reach the age of 12 or 13. This three-year project ended last year, but our council was so pleased with the results that they continued it, applying the approach to all complex families, not just Roma. We have been sharing our approach with lots of other European countries.”

LabourPlus

The LabourPlus project was launched in 2012. The municipality of Nieuwegein is its lead partner and funding comes from the European Regional Development Fund. Its aim is to combat the social exclusion of vulnerable groups from the labour market, including migrants and the Roma in particular. <http://www.labourplus.eu>