



Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

# **Response to Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: Mainstreaming Equality of Opportunity for Travellers in Education: Towards a Strategy**

Cons 627  
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- 1.0 Introduction
- 1.1 The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland's paper Mainstreaming Equality of Opportunity for Travellers in Education: Towards a Strategy. Our comments are informed by NICVA's role as the representative body for the voluntary and community sector and by a vision of society where all people are treated fairly, where sectarianism and discrimination are not tolerated and where respect for human rights and equality is regarded as the norm.
- 2.0 Comments
- 2.1 We welcome this well-researched paper, with its account of the experiences of Traveller children in education, the inequalities, racism and bullying they endure, the legislative and policy context and suggested policy solutions. We support the recommendations based on attendance, participation, attainment and transitions. We note that the Equality Commission (ECNI) has commissioned a further paper on Traveller education to develop its own thinking; that it is carrying out joint research into the effectiveness of education provision with Niccy and that ECNI is represented on the Race Equality Forum.
- 2.2 We also understand that ECNI's business plan highlights mainstreaming equality of opportunity in education, with equal access to education by Travellers a particular priority. We applaud your ongoing consultation with Traveller parents and children and with representative organisations and understand that responses to this paper will inform your policy positions. NICVA's policy manifesto demonstrates that 'over 55 per cent of Travellers are children ...the challenge of that minority's social inclusion is primarily a children's issue.' Therefore we support your work to date and would like to offer a few suggestions.
- 3.0 Recommendations
- 3.1 We would argue that the legislative and policy context could include a reference to the impact of the Unauthorised Encampments legislation that may violate Traveller's human rights due to the increase in police powers to remove unauthorised encampments. We argued in our response to DSD that these encampments exist due to the lack of alternative facilities and that the new legislation will criminalise Travellers because they have nowhere to live. DSD suggested as mitigating evidence that accommodation is to be provided by the Housing Executive over the next five years. We argued that it is inadequate to use the good intentions of the Housing Order as a policy basis for new coercive legislation. Part of our opposition to the Unauthorised Encampment legislation rested on the adverse impact on children's education and access to healthcare and social services. The uncertainties of eviction, confiscation, fining and/or imprisonment of parents are bound to have a traumatic effect on children and young people, especially those with

learning disabilities, as well as leading to the potential infringement of rights to enjoyment of culture and family life.

- 3.2 We understand that the Housing Executive has made some progress in providing accommodation for Travellers in the form of transit sites and group housing. However we have additional concerns about the outworking of the Review of Public Administration which may mean that responsibility for Traveller accommodation is moved back to the councils. Considering that the government was able to justify its Unauthorised Encampments legislation by reference to strong support from 14 district councils representing various shades of political opinion, it is vital that the Commission factors this possible development into its strategy.
- 3.3 It may also be useful to include reference to developments in extending the statutory duty to schools and its potential for promoting the equality of opportunity of Traveller children.
- 3.4 Other human rights bodies have been active in the field of Traveller's economic, social and cultural rights – for example, in its memorandum to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, <sup>1</sup>the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) highlighted that '92% of Travellers leave education with no qualifications and that the majority of Traveller children do not attend school regularly after primary school.' After referring to government caveats about lack of resources, NIHRC stated that it is difficult to see how the problems can be solved without making additional funding available. It argued that a rights-based approach stresses that access to employment, housing and education must be guaranteed and that there is a clear onus on government to make the necessary funding available, quoting the UN Committee's observation that it 'does not find any factors or particular difficulties that impede full implementation of the Covenant in the United Kingdom.'

Therefore it might be profitable to work with the NIHRC on an overview of the human rights aspect of the policy and with children's organisations on the right of children to have their opinions taken into consideration.

- 3.5 The paper focuses on attendance, participation, attainment and transitions. We would recommend that the strategy should also consider the curriculum and teacher training. It might be useful to approach CCEA which is responsible for new curriculum developments in Learning for Life and Work and would be in a position to ensure the development of culturally appropriate resources and relevant teaching strategies to encourage student engagement and attendance. The Education Order will also encourage more emphasis on individual learning plans and vocational learning which could be a useful way to engage with Traveller children eg basing literacy development on practical requirements like passing the driving test. It is also

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<sup>1</sup> JCHR report November 2004 considers the implementation of the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the UK. It takes as its starting point the Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on the UK's Fourth Report under the Covenant.

important to consider the strengths of community education which can provide more flexible and personalised opportunities, often through voluntary organisations.

- 3.6 We would also suggest that the Commission work with educationalists in teacher training to ensure more emphasis on interculturalism and anti-racist training, more attention to the merits of formative over summative assessment and multiple intelligence approaches at initial teacher training and professional development stages.
- 3.7 We have already mentioned our anxiety about the impact of the Unauthorised Encampments legislation and would urge the development of an integrated education, health and accommodation strategy. The education of Traveller children cannot be separated from the quality of their living conditions and accommodation needs. Just as human rights are indivisible, Maslow's hierarchy of needs teaches us that physical needs cannot be divorced from cognitive, emotional and social needs.
- 4.0 Conclusions
- 4.1 However to end on a positive note – it is possible to find good work at council level – and we would commend the model of good practice found in the Leicester Project. The council provides public land for a permanent site, tries to involve Traveller families in the life of the community and offers social services, medical care, learning support for children and access to adult courses on site. A social worker operates on the site, health visitors come to help with problems and other social workers take children to school and bring them back after lessons.
- 4.2 One final point – we assume that the Department of Education will issue an updated circular in light of the findings and recommendations from your strategy.