

Irish Traveller Movement in Britain - Policy Paper on Education

Introduction - The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain (ITMB) is a policy and voice national charity that works towards raising the social inclusion of Irish Travellers. The following paper is based upon discussions with the ITMB Advisory Group, officials in the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and other experts.

The paper provides:

- A statement of principles on education around which the ITMB can campaign.
- A set of policy proposals which the ITMB believe are important to raising the educational inclusion of Travellers.

Background - Education is a central factor in increasing the social inclusion of Irish Travellers. At present Irish Travellers have low rates of achievement and attendance, especially at secondary school. For example:

- Attendance - Ofsted in 2003 found that amongst the Traveller Education Services it observed that secondary school enrolment amongst Travellers was just over 60 percent and at Key Stage Four it was 47%. (Ofsted, 2003, 8)
- Achievement – In 2005 only 30% of Irish Traveller pupils gained the expected level in writing at Key Stage 1. Only 22.5% gained 5+ A-C GCSEs compared to a national average of 54.9%. 46% were identified as Special Educational Needs (Letter from Lord Adonis, 16th November, 2006).
- Bullying and Exclusion - High numbers of Traveller pupils have experienced some form of racial abuse (Derrington and Kendall, 2005, 122). Traveller pupils are four times more likely to be permanently excluded than other pupils (Letter from Lord Adonis, 16th November, 2006).

Poor educational experiences are contributing towards the exclusion of Irish Travellers. Improved participation and achievement in mainstream education will:

- Empower Irish Travellers and help them voice their concerns and aspirations and play a greater role in decision making processes that affect their lives.
- Strengthen the Traveller economy helping Travellers to develop new skills and expand their businesses.

Statement of Principles

All children are entitled to an education which will allow them to reach their full potential in life. Adults who have suffered educational disadvantage are entitled to lifelong learning opportunities to enable them to enjoy their rights and opportunities.

Travellers of Irish Heritage and Gypsy Roma underachieve at all stages of the education system, are more likely to be excluded than other children, to be identified as having special educational needs and sent to special schools.

1. To combat underachievement ITMB will work with education authorities to develop a relevant curriculum which recognises and values the culture and history of Irish Traveller communities.
2. ITMB believes Travellers are their own best advocates and will promote dialogue between communities and the schools and local authorities responsible for providing education. We will encourage community representatives to participate in consultations with local ethnic minority issues.
3. ITMB will develop training courses and resources to raise awareness of challenges faced by Irish Travellers in all sectors of education and employment.
4. ITMB recognises that some Irish Travellers see education as a threat to their children's safety, culture and values and elect to educate their children at home. We regard this as a failure of the education system to provide appropriate education and conditions in which it can take place. ITMB will lobby against racism and bullying, for the recognition of parents rights on religious and health issues and for a varied, relevant and flexible curriculum to meet the needs of all children.
5. Racism in society undermines education and opportunities. ITMB will work with education providers to ensure that race equality policies protect Irish Travellers, and teaching and learning promote understanding and community cohesion.
6. ITMB welcomes the current central government focus on Gypsy Roma Traveller communities. It will participate in dialogue with the DCSF to ensure developing policies include and support the culture and values of Irish Travellers.
7. The ITMB recognises the under-representation of employees from Irish Traveller and Gypsy Roma communities in the education workforce. We will lobby for the development of career paths and appropriate training opportunities to enable more community members to become valued and respected members of school staffs, governors, local authorities and councils.
8. ITMB recognises the work done by the national network of Traveller Education Services to support the inclusion and opportunities of Gypsy Roma Traveller families and children. This network is particularly important providing a safety net for vulnerable families and maintaining continuity when families move from area to area. ITMB will work in partnership with these services to achieve the best outcomes for local families.
9. The ITMB believes that forms of education that are inclusive rather than selective and which actively involve the Irish Traveller and wider community in their management are the most beneficial to positive educational experiences.

Policy Proposals

Traveller Education Services - Funding and Mainstreaming

- Traveller Education Services cannot be seen as having sole 'ownership' of this issue; responsibility has to be shared with the community itself but also schools and mainstream service providers.
- Involving Traveller Education Services at a more strategic level presents a better use of resources but the strong exclusion and educational failure

suffered by many Traveller pupils presents a strong case for a need for a national support network to maintain educational continuity and access to services. In the future this may entail reorganisation of the way this support is presently delivered.

- Traveller Education Services need improved funding programmes to increase provision and planning. Smaller services may benefit by joining networks with other services which will increase the support and expertise that small Traveller Education Services can call upon.

Ethnic Monitoring

- Support needs to be given to initiatives that will increase self ascription in ethnic monitoring. Accurate ethnic monitoring will allow school to clearly identify exclusion and take action. An increase in self ascription may in part be dependent on greater understanding and respect towards Travellers from the wider community.

Every Child Matters

- The ITMB welcomes the letter that Lord Adonis sent to Children's Services but is disappointed that only a small proportion of local authority Director's for Children Services responded to the letter (16th November, 2006). Adonis commended inter-agency work on Gypsies and Travellers and appealed for information on this and how it was being developed through Children's and Young Peoples' Plans (which should focus on vulnerable children such as Irish Travellers) and information on measures to increase access and inclusion for Travellers. The poor response to Adonis indicates that the potential of 'Every Child Matters' may not have fully reached the Traveller community.
- There is a need for improved awareness and training on Traveller issues amongst Directors of Children's Services and social services to see the 'Every Child Matters' agenda delivered more effectively.
- On account of the poor response to the Adonis letter the DCSF reissued it in December 2007. The ITMB hopes that the analysis of responses will result in the dissemination of good practice and regional debates that the Adonis letter indicated were needed.
- The ITMB has found through its support and establishment of Traveller Inter-Agency Forums in London boroughs that these forums are highly effective in promoting interagency work. Support and resources are needed to encourage the development of more of these forums and to disseminate good practice.

Involving Travellers

- The ITMB would like to see the creation of a forum by the DCSF where Travellers and practitioners can regularly liaise with DCSF officials similar to the successful forum organised by Communities and Local Government on Traveller accommodation issues.
- Improved communication could be a vital component in reducing conflict and tension. In some cases these problems often arise because of mutual misunderstandings. Mediation and initiatives such as family group conferencing, restorative justice and Traveller mediators could provide

creative ways to overcome misconceptions on both sides and forge more positive relations. Resources should be made available to enable schools to explore these strategies.

- A number of schools and Traveller Education Services have successfully recruited members of the Traveller community as classroom assistants and school governors. The ITMB believes that the DCSF needs to look at means to increase these trends.

Bullying and Relationships

- Greater Traveller involvement in school is also dependent on creating safe environments for Traveller pupils where they are not subjected to bullying. There is a need for anti bullying schemes and action groups to increase their awareness of Irish Traveller experiences and consider whether specifically tailored and targeted measures are needed.
- Schools should consider whether Travellers are adequately catered for by anti bullying strategies and included in Race Equality Schemes, this may be especially important in Catholic schools, whom it has been claimed, are less aware and sensitive to race issues and Traveller inclusion than mainstream local authority schools (Power, 2004, 66). Schools also need to consider the identification of safe places (sanctuaries) where Traveller children can go if subjected to bullying, strategies to dissuade the bullies and promote Traveller culture, peer support, mentoring, homework clubs and staff training (DfES, 2004, 6). Such initiatives can play an important role in minimising conflict and developing positive relationships.

The Curriculum

- Sure Start and other pre and early school learning strategies including family learning have been shown to play an important role in raising Traveller achievement (Tyler, 2005, 62; Clark and Greenfields, 2006, 220; DfES, 2003, 8). Such initiatives need to be extended.
- A more vocational and discovery orientated curriculum is a major desire of many Irish Traveller parents for their children at the onset of adolescence (Power, 2004, 71). The prospects of vocational study being available earlier than opportunities currently on offer in key stage four are limited. The late opportunities for vocationalism may continue to be to the disadvantage of some Irish Travellers as many are 'dropping out' of school at the start of key stage three because of their disengagement with the curriculum.
- Hope of curricular reform though is evident in a series of recent statements by Ed Balls, the Secretary of State for Education, who has indicated that a quarter of the school day could be freed up in a curriculum that is less prescriptive and creates greater independence, personalised teaching and flexibility (Hansard, column 1321, 10th July, 2007). These reforms are to be welcomed and could create a syllabus and learning experience that Irish Travellers are more willing to subscribe to if new classes are imaginatively planned and well resourced.
- The Department for Children, Families and School has designated June 2008 as the first Traveller history month in which there will be a celebration of Gypsy, Traveller, Roma culture. This initiative could play a major role in raising the profile of Traveller culture in schools but also play a key role in

reducing bullying and raising the levels of Traveller self ascription in ethnic monitoring. The ITMB believes that a long term strategy that is well resourced and which maximises Traveller involvement is a prerequisite for this initiative to be successful.

Academy Schools

- Academy and Trust school programmes provide schools and their governing bodies with greater autonomy and virtual independence from local authorities' strategic management. If the new management regimes at these schools mirror the negative attitudes to Irish Travellers that schools elsewhere have displayed who have tried to restrict Traveller entry and numbers in their schools (Power, 2004, 66), then Irish Travellers may find it more difficult to gain admission to academy and Trust schools given the greater freedom these schools enjoy in the selection process (National Union of Teachers, 2007).
- Academy schools are said to have an exclusion rate three times that of neighbouring schools (Guardian, 'Academy Exclusion is Selection by Backdoor', 10th July 2007). Again this could have negative implications for vulnerable minorities like Irish Travellers who are over-represented in school exclusions (Letter from Lord Adonis to Directors of Children's Services, 16th November, 2006).
- The Irish Traveller Movement welcomes the announcement by the Government that it is to launch a review to determine whether academies are achieving their original goal of tackling disadvantage in the weakest urban schools (Guardian 13/11/2007). A key safeguard against these dangers would be to ensure parental and local authority representation and input into the governance and coordination of academy schools.

Elective Home Education

- The numbers of Gypsy and Traveller families opting for elective home education has risen steadily. For some, elective home education has offered a means to escape non-prosecution for non-attendance as such home education is poorly monitored, for others disillusioned with school it offers the chance of developing basic and key skills.
- The ITMB believes elective home education should be subject to improved monitoring and support but would argue that an improved curriculum and safer school environment would reduce the demand for elective home education.

Raising the Leaving Age

- The Government in its Education and Skills Bill intends to raise the education leaving age to eighteen, and to see all adolescents engaged in academic educational training or vocational apprenticeships. This programme will be obligatory and non-compliance could lead to prosecution.
- This reform could cause conflict between Irish Travellers and the authorities as it could be at odds with traditional Traveller adolescent socialisation practices that practice in-family learning, training and employment experiences.

- However, the Education and Skills Bill offers a number of important opportunities to improve training/business development and health and safety for young Travellers. Concerns regarding the impact on Travellers can be overcome with careful consideration of their needs.
- Connexions, Children's Trusts and the Learning and Skills Council are to play an important role in the delivery of the proposals in the Education and Skills Bill, it is important that they have a tailored strategy on working with Travellers which should include the training of staff and clear references to Travellers in their equalities policies.
- The Education and Skills Bill will create a duty on local authorities to assess the training needs of young people with Special Educational Needs. The ITMB believes that this duty should be extended to young people disadvantaged in the education system, this will include Irish Travellers.

Single Equalities Act

- The Single Equalities Act will create one single equality duty that governs the various equalities strands, including race. Strong concern has been expressed at the draft proposals contained in the Discrimination Law Review. Critics argue that these will weaken existing duties. Concern has also been expressed over a failure to guarantee improved monitoring, guidance and enforcement.
- The ITMB supports the Commission for Racial Equality response to the Discrimination Law Review which recommends a general equality duty, as opposed to what the Government is proposing that is a limited duty to set and pursue only certain equality objectives (CRE, 2007 paragraph 259). This would make race equality documents in many schools 'living documents' at the fore of school planning and reflection, and could encourage schools to give greater consideration to vulnerable minorities like Irish Travellers.

Campaigning for an Inclusive Education system

The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain will:

- Campaign for and promote the principles and policies contained in this paper
- Place the paper on the ITMB website and circulate this paper and invite comments

Send this paper to:

- The Department for Children, School and Families
- The Advisory Committee for the Education of Travellers and Romanies (ACERT)
- The National Association of Traveller Teachers
- The Officers of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Traveller Law Reform
- National charities like the Children's Society, Catholic Children's Society and Save the Children.
- Connexions and the Learning and Skills Council
- The Traveller Law Reform Project – and work with them to promote the paper's proposals.