Response by Barnardo’s NI to the DE Consultation on a ‘Draft Traveller Child in Education Action Framework’

Introduction and background

Barnardo’s NI is the largest children’s charity in Northern Ireland. We work with almost 11,000 children, young people and families in more than sixty services and in sixty schools. Our services range from family support to work with looked after children, BME children and families, and children and young people who are in need of support across a wide range of services.

These include a dedicated Travellers Pre-School service for 16 Traveller children aged two and a half to four years, which has been in operation for almost twenty years. Taking cognisance of DE policy on integration / segregation which states that ‘it is in the best long-term interests of both Traveller children and settled children that they should be educated together’, we have recently reviewed this pre-school provision. Our Traveller service has been subsequently redesigned to deliver a service for two year old children, specifically from the Traveller community. This is being delivered on-site in a mainstream primary school as a specialised pilot over a three year period starting October 2012.

Our work on the ground, at both policy and practice level, provides us with a clear overview of many of the issues currently impacting upon Traveller children and their parents. We therefore welcome this opportunity to provide a response to the DE consultation on a ‘Draft Traveller Child in Education Framework’. Our response has been informed by consultation with our experienced practitioners working directly with the Traveller community.

Consultation Questions

- **Principles of the Draft Action Framework**

**Q.1** Do you agree with the principles of the Draft Action Framework?

**Yes**
Q.2 – Do you think that, overall, the actions outlined in the Draft Framework will:

a) Increase engagement with Traveller children, young people and their families?
b) Promote inclusion of Traveller children, young people and their families?
c) Increase the commitment to education among Traveller children, young people and their families?
d) Improve educational achievement of Traveller children and young people?

Yes – but only if the Action Framework is accompanied by a strategic and focused delivery plan clearly outlining how these will all be achieved. The draft document states that a regional Traveller Education Support Service (TESS) will be fully operational by April 2013 and will be tasked then with developing the delivery plan. This must be an immediate priority if the delivery plan is to be implemented in the same year, which we believe is essential. It would be helpful if DE provides clarification as to when the delivery plan will be fully implemented.

It is critical that the TESS delivery plan demonstrates actionable targets and measureable indicators, with clearly assigned roles and responsibilities; also that it clearly links in with any relevant existing and planned policies and strategies across all NI Executive Departments. The delivery plan must be focused on effectiveness and what works in delivery to achieve the necessary outcomes for Traveller children. Periods of review and evaluation of the Framework and delivery plan should also be included.

It is our view that without such a detailed plan in place, the Framework’s potential to close the gap in educational achievement and equality for Traveller children cannot be realised.

• Strategic Delivery and Partnership

Q.3 – Do you agree that the actions proposed will ensure strategic delivery and partnership working?

No – until production and implementation of the TESS delivery plan, we remain unconvinced that strategic delivery and partnership working will be ensured (Please also see response at Q.2). At this stage the necessary detail about how Travellers will be actively and meaningfully engaged is absent.
Access to Educational Opportunities

Q.4 – Do you agree with the Framework proposals to provide additional support for Traveller children when they move from:

a) Pre-school to Primary

Yes – Additional support to help Traveller children make the transition into primary school is very important. Many Traveller parents will have had a negative experience of school so may be reluctant about their own children entering mainstream education for the first time.

However, Barnardo’s NI believes that promoting earlier intervention should also be a central component of the Framework. In our experience Traveller parents need considerable support to move their children into mainstream pre-school provision.

Although numbers have increased due to initiatives such as Toybox and Barnardo’s Pre-School Traveller service, the uptake of pre-school places by Travellers is still considerably lower than that of non-Traveller children. This means that many pre-school aged Traveller children are missing out on vital early learning and development opportunities. Indeed research highlights the educational benefits experienced by children who attend pre-school, such as enhanced cognitive and social development, and greater progress in literacy and numeracy over the first four years of primary school.

Barnardo’s NI therefore recommends that significant emphasis is placed on supporting Traveller families at the earliest possible opportunity to consider their choices in applying for pre-school placements, and to assist with the application process. They particularly need support to liaise with local pre-school providers and break down barriers to maximise and facilitate Traveller access.

b) Primary to Secondary

Yes – The transition may be smoother for Traveller children already attending the local mainstream primary school, but for those who have not then additional support will be especially important.

NOTE: While there is a real need to provide support to Traveller children making the transitions to pre-school, primary and then secondary school, in our view there is still some dedicated work that needs to be done to ensure that schools are ready to receive Traveller children. People from the Traveller community can still experience high levels of prejudice from the rest of society. Traveller parents’ reluctance to send their children to mainstream

1 The Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI; 2006)
school often stems from fear their child will go through similar negative experiences they themselves experienced, such as racist bullying (Bhopal, 2004). Cultural awareness raising about Traveller life is therefore essential across the education system for both staff and pupils.

**Improved School Attendance**

**Q.5** – Do you agree that the legal school attendance requirement for Traveller children should be reviewed?

**Yes** – As highlighted in the consultation document, despite considerable investment in Traveller education, Traveller children continue to have exceptionally poor educational outcomes. They also have poor school attendance which is likely to be an important factor in low educational attainment.

In order to help close the gap and reduce inequalities for Traveller children in education there should be the same expectation of regular school attendance by Traveller children as there is for non-Traveller children. While it is important to consider the rights of Traveller families to travel, this needs to be balanced with the child’s right to engage and achieve in education in order to maximise positive life chances. There should also be a similar expectation that Educational Welfare Officers enforce school attendance with Traveller children in the same way as for pupils outside the Traveller community.

**Ambitions and Expectations**

**Q.6** – Do you agree that the range of actions proposed will increase the ambitions, progress and prospects of Traveller children and young people?

**Yes** – However, this very much depends on effective engagement with Traveller parents being a core component of the delivery plan. Personal education plans will help keep parents engaged; but this also needs to be supported in a meaningful way by exploring barriers to parental involvement in their children’s education, and in accessing the education system. A strategic and multi-faceted approach should be applied to raising awareness in the full range of potential schools; and in promoting parental involvement in supporting their children’s education.

Central to this involvement is improving Traveller parents’ literacy levels; in our view if this isn’t effectively tackled then Traveller children will continue to need additional supports. There is a mismatch between what parents are or feel capable of, regarding supporting their child’s learning, and what schools expect of them. For example, many parents have low levels of schooling and literacy (e.g. AITHS, 2010) which makes it difficult for them to support their child during standard school tasks such as homework.
Q.7 – Are there any additional actions which you feel would help to raise ambitions, performance and prospects among Traveller pupils?

Yes - Closer working relationships between health visitors and voluntary organisations should be promoted so that Traveller children are identified at an early age. This would help ensure they are accessing the full range of health and education services, particularly pre-school provision. Voluntary organisations also need to be appropriately supported to engage Traveller parents with literacy programmes, and with the Department for Employment and Learning.

While it is hoped literacy standards for Traveller children entering the education system will improve over the next ten years, it is also essential that suitable supports are put in place for children who are already midway through their education; these children need to be linked in with new services within the school and on an outreach basis, and also potential career opportunities.

Inclusion, Integration and Interculturalism

Q.8 – Do you agree that the practice of providing Traveller specific transport should be reviewed?

Yes – However, inconsistency attendance by Traveller children is a considerable barrier to educational achievement. It is therefore important the current transport arrangements are reviewed, alternative options explored and a phased reduction only ever considered over a period of time and in direct consultation with Traveller families.

Additional Comments

Q.9 – Do you have any additional suggestions or comments on the Traveller Child in Education Action Framework?

A key aspect to the success of the Framework is promoting a shift in attitudes amongst some educationalists towards Traveller families. They have an important part to play in making schools a welcome place for Travellers, and while some have achieved this others still have some way to go. With particular reference to promoting Traveller inclusion, for this to be successful it is absolutely essential to build trust between educators and Traveller families. The Department of Education must actively support existing and new initiatives that are undertaking to do that.

We would emphasise again the need for a greater focus on early intervention; and ensuring links are made and well coordinated between the newly established sub-groups and services on the ground.
**Further Information**

If you have any queries or would like further information, please contact:

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