

# **Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI)**

**Response to**

**Equality Commission for NI**

**Mainstreaming Equality of  
Opportunity for Travellers in  
Education: Towards a Strategy**

**July 2006**

## **Introduction**

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the regional umbrella body for the children's sector in Northern Ireland.

CiNI represents the interests of its 90 member organisations, providing policy, information, training and participation support services to members in their direct work with and for children and young people. Many of our member organisations work directly with multiple identity children and young people who have experienced significant inequality in terms of their access to essential services which are central to enabling them to grow and develop and reach their full potential as equal citizens in society.

CiNI welcomes the Equality Commission consultation on Mainstreaming Equality of Opportunity for Travellers in Education.

We note from the census figures summarised in the consultation document that almost a third (32.2%) of the Traveller population are under 16 years of age and therefore of compulsory school age, hence policy to mainstream equality of opportunity in education has the potential to have significant positive impact on Traveller children and young people.

## **Mainstreaming Equality of Opportunity in Education – the introduction of section 75 to schools in Northern Ireland**

CiNI supports the Commission's objective to mainstream equality of opportunity for Travellers in education. CiNI believes that a key lever to enabling the delivery of this objective is the introduction to schools in Northern Ireland of the statutory section 75 duty to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity in carrying out their functions. We therefore recommend that as a matter of urgency the section 75 duty should be introduced to schools.

Clearly even with the introduction of section 75 to schools a focus on mainstreaming equality of opportunity in education for Travellers is required and we firmly agree with the Commission that equal access to education by Travellers should be a policy priority given their experience of inequality in education.

## **The Review of Public Administration**

CiNI would highlight that the issue of mainstreaming equality of opportunity in education, with the current particular focus on Travellers is extremely timely given the fundamental changes occurring within the education system with the roll out of the recommendations from the Review of Public Administration. We would advocate that the Commission seek to positively influence the current change process and work with statutory education providers to ensure that equality of opportunity is mainstreamed within the new administrative structures and functioning of the education system. In this change process there is a unique opportunity for the Commission to strategically influence the way in which education is accessed by and delivered to Traveller children and young people. CiNI believes that acknowledging the level of inequality experienced by Travellers in education Traveller parents, children and their representatives should be

involved as key stakeholders in taking forward the development and implementation of the new administrative arrangements to ensure that these are responsive to and capable of addressing the inequalities experienced by Travellers in education. This must include the representation of Travellers and their organisations on education planning forums including the active representation of Traveller parents on Boards of Governors.

### **The Children and Young People's Funding Package**

CiNI has welcomed the recent announcement of the £100 million Children and Young People's Funding Package targeted in the main at education and health provision. We believe that this Funding Package has the potential to support the mainstreaming of equality of opportunity in education for Travellers. However while we note that there are Traveller specific interventions including £100k which is to be invested to increase the enrolment of Traveller children in pre-school settings, we are concerned that other key initiatives, including the expansion of Sure Start, are area-based, thereby targeting the most disadvantaged wards in Northern Ireland. With this area focus it is likely that Traveller children may not benefit from equal access to such initiatives.

CiNI would recommend that the proposals for spend and delivery of this Funding Package should be equality impact assessed to ensure Traveller children have equal access to initiatives aimed at tackling disadvantage which potentially could positively impact on mainstreaming equality of opportunity for Travellers in education.

### **Developing Policy Solutions for Travellers in Education**

CiNI supports the Commission's proposal to develop policy solutions in the areas of attainment, attendance, participation and transitions. We would want to see these translated into a transparent, deliverable and measurable strategic framework for action.

We would also advocate that an important element in supporting mainstreaming of equality of opportunity for Travellers in education must be the review and updating of policy relating to Traveller education and in particular there is a need for urgent review and updating of the DENI Circular Number 1993/37 *Policy and Guidelines for the Education of Children from Traveller Families*. We would advocate that the policy be reviewed in light of subsequent legislative developments so that it is harmonised upward to align with the standards set in subsequent legislation and policy, particularly being mindful of the introduction of the duty on public authorities, including education providers, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity in carrying out their functions.

### **Attendance**

CiNI would support the development of strategies to address attendance issues and we agree that these must apply to pre-school through to adult education and build on current domestic and international best practice. Clearly strategies to address attendance must have at their core an emphasis on promoting the value of education to Traveller parents and their children.

## **Participation**

Again we would emphasise that mainstreaming equality of opportunity for Travellers in education must be seen in the wider context of mainstreaming equality of opportunity in education generally, therefore one of the most effective methods of mainstreaming equality of opportunity for Travellers in education is through the introduction of section 75 to schools in Northern Ireland. All children should be enabled to participate in decision making processes in their schools and particular focus should be given to supporting Traveller children and other multiple identity children to participate fully, actively and effectively in the life of their schools.

CiNI would suggest that within the context of the extended school approach which is due to be rolled out over the next two years that schools must give particular consideration to how they can support and encourage the engagement of Traveller parents and children in this new approach so that their experience of inequality can be pro-actively addressed.

In addition within the new administrative arrangements for the provision of education in Northern Ireland we believe there is a fresh opportunity to consider the training and support needs of our education providers and clearly there is a manifest need as indicated in the consultation document (para. 45) for a robust cultural awareness programme to be comprehensively rolled out across the education system and effectively monitored and reviewed. Such a programme must include Traveller specific elements and provide opportunities for the engagement of the Traveller community in the delivery of these programmes.

## **Attainment**

CiNI shares the Commission's view that "access to accurate baseline data disaggregated by Traveller status from the minority ethnic category is an area that needs immediate action" (para. 47)

CiNI believes that the mainstreaming of equality of opportunity for Travellers in education supported through the introduction of section 75 to schools in Northern Ireland would be a key lever in addressing the fundamental concerns relating to data collection. With the introduction of section 75 to schools there would be a statutory requirement on schools to gather disaggregated data relating to the section 75 groups including Traveller children as a means of supporting the Equality Impact Assessment process. We would also highlight that the collection and analysis of disaggregated data on children and young people including vulnerable groups which can assist with assessing and designing policies is a key recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of Child in its 2002 report on GB and Northern Ireland's Implementation of the UNCRC.

## **Transitions**

Under the new administrative arrangements for education we would recommend that the Department of Education take the lead in reviewing again the decision to maintain St Mary's Primary school as a school primarily for Traveller children. We would highlight

that particular consideration should be given to the outcome from the Commission's direct consultation with Travellers which suggested that "overwhelmingly Travellers are in favour of integrated provision and that separate provision does not mean equal treatment" (para. 51). We believe that in view of the support from the Traveller community for equal treatment through de-segregation that the PSI recommendation to the relevant education bodies to "develop a clear strategy and action plan to phase out St Mary's...over a five year period" should be taken forward as a priority.

Clearly separate provision goes against the ethos of equality of opportunity. Policy interventions should be developed to address the concerns of parents and children who currently opt for separate provision rather than integrated provision, i.e. their safety concerns and fear of bullying must be pro-actively addressed so that they are supported in accessing mainstream education and therefore moving toward the experience of equality of opportunity. However we recognise that equality of opportunity for Travellers in education is much more than simply attending mainstream schools and policy interventions will also be required to enable equality of opportunity in terms of educational experience.

### **Strategy Development and Action Planning**

CiNI notes that the consultation focuses on progress "towards a strategy". We would strongly recommend that an actual strategy and accompanying action plan are developed expediently to pro-actively address the inequalities experienced by Travellers in education.

However we would also highlight that key to the effectiveness of any future strategy and action plan is the co-operation from statutory education providers and their commitment to partnership working. This co-operation and commitment to partnership working from the statutory sector must be secured in advance of further work to develop a strategy and action plan.

The consultation document identifies the clear need for a strategic framework and we would highlight that in developing such a strategic framework there are lessons to be learnt from the problems experienced in relation to implementation of the PSI recommendations and Race Equality Strategy. A strategy and action plan must be developed with outcomes relating to the elimination of educational disadvantage for Travellers and must be accompanied by tangible targets and indicators to demonstrate progress toward the achievement of outcomes. We would also highlight that delivery of the strategy and action plan must be supported by the allocation of ring-fenced resources.

CiNI welcomes the initial direct consultation with Travellers that has been undertaken and which has informed the development of the current consultation document. We would highlight that such direct engagement, particularly including Traveller children and young people, should be an integral element of the process of developing the actual strategy and action plan and overseeing its implementation, thereby complying with the section 75 requirement to consult with directly affected groups on policy development.

We would also highlight that the Commission in developing the strategy and accompanying action must also in compliance with the section 75 duty produce an

accessible child friendly version of the current consultation document and any subsequent consultation documents and ensure that policy proposals are screened and where necessary equality impact assessed. When published CiNI would be keen to view the analysis of the responses to this current consultation and at this point would welcome information on the system that will be used to analyse the responses and the weighting system that will be used for the analysis in relation to the weight given to individual and organisational responses.

Finally while we welcome the Commission's commitment to the mainstreaming of equality of opportunity in education and its particular focus on mainstreaming equality of opportunity for Travellers in education, we would highlight that we believe that this is a process that must be committed to beyond the coming year. We believe that it is an objective which will require the ongoing support and commitment of the Commission through implementation, monitoring and review of a strategic framework and supporting action plan.