

Appendix 2 – Draft Response

Principles of the draft Action Framework

The Traveller Child in Education Action Framework was drafted by the Department of Education (DE) in response to the recommendations of the Taskforce on Traveller Education which agreed a number of fundamental principles as outlined below.

Q1. Do you agree with the principles of the draft Action Framework, which are as follows:

a) Every child is an equal child.

Yes

b) The expectations for Traveller children should be the same as for all others.

Yes

c) Outcomes for Traveller children should parallel the range of outcomes for all children.

Yes

d) Traveller parents have the same entitlements and responsibilities as all other parents.

Yes

e) All schools should be open to and welcoming of Traveller children.

Yes

f) Parents of Traveller children should have access to any school of their choice.

Yes

Additional Comments:

We welcome the principles as set out though would have thought that the Department already has robust processes in place to deliver their services to the traveller community. The Race Relation Order (NI 1997) provides the legislation framework to ensure equality in the delivery of services to the Travellers community.

Q2. Do you think that, overall, the actions outlined in the Draft Framework will:

(a) Increase engagement with Traveller children, young people and their families?

No

Please provide any additional comments or suggestions.

Before this can happen, there needs to be an inter-agency mapping exercise carried out on a regional basis to formally establish the location of Traveller families and their communities across NI. This will provide the basis for the comprehensive consultation and engagement that is required. It could be driven by the Traveller Education Support Service (TESS) that covers ALL of the traveller community throughout NI.

(b) Promote inclusion of Traveller children, young people and their families?

Yes

Please provide any additional comments or suggestions.

It is very worrying that the attendance and achievement statistics still show such an extreme difference between what Traveller children can expect compared to the general population. While we appreciate that target dates have been set for specific actions in the plan, it would be more reassuring to see definite time-based targets to achieve the desired outcomes together with details of the resources that will be used. For example, to increase Traveller attendance or achievement by XX% by the year XXXX. Considering equality for the Traveller community has been in law since 1997 the plan should be more specific about how and when these inequalities will be addressed.

(c) Increase the commitment to education among Traveller children, young people and their families?

Yes

Please provide any additional comments or suggestions.

As b) above.

(d) Improve educational achievement of Traveller children and young people?

Yes

Please provide any additional comments or suggestions.

As a) above, plus clear performance targets need to be set to demonstrate the ambition of DE and what it expects from its departments. Targets will also help to measure DE's progress in achieving equality of services and, eventually, achievement.

Strategic Delivery and Partnership

A number of actions have been proposed for strategic delivery and partnership in the draft Framework in order to promote a more consistent and co-ordinated approach in all aspects of Traveller education, including:

- Establishing a regional Traveller Education Support Service (TESS).
- Development and implementation of a delivery plan by TESS, based on good practice, addressing the recommendations of the Taskforce and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).
- Consultation by TESS, in collaboration with other bodies, with the Traveller community in relation to the delivery of the Framework and Delivery Plan.
- TESS undertaking a process of joint planning with the Inclusion and Diversity Service (IDS) and Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) policy to align and integrate practice on inclusion.

Q3. Do you agree that the actions proposed will ensure strategic delivery and partnership working?

Yes

Please provide any additional comments or suggestions.

It important that TEES is seen as regional body and not associated solely with any particular group such as the Southern Area Action Team. Consultation must be broad enough to include all interested stakeholders such as councils and NGO groups. The process must be transparent and accountable.

Access to Educational Opportunities

The Framework outlines how DE proposes to improve understanding among Traveller families of access to educational provision and opportunities, namely by:

- DE and TESS working together, with stakeholders to identify a suitable range of communication methods.
- ELBs/ESA agreeing an inter-Board Traveller attendance strategy, including transitional support programmes for use across all educational sectors.

Q4. Do you agree with the Framework proposals to provide additional support for Traveller children when they move from:

a) Pre-school to Primary

Yes

Please give reasons.

To maximise the likelihood of success, it is critical that there is transparent engagement with Traveller families and stakeholders. We approve the suggestion that monitoring will be conducted by a group that will have representation from NGOs, as we feel that it might be difficult to build trust, and hence the process may be compromised, if processes are policed solely in-house by TESS or the DE without any external scrutiny. It is also important to keep processes simple and have them set out in plain English.

b) Primary to Secondary

Yes

Please give reasons.

As a) above plus the statistics for this sector (attendance, achievement, etc, which are both a factor of ten worse than the average) are unacceptable and therefore require specific immediate attention.

Improved School Attendance

Action 4 in the draft Framework aims to improve attendance at school by Traveller pupils through detailed analysis of attendance data to inform an inter-Board strategy and also by reviewing the current legislation which allows the children of a parent travelling on business to attend school only 100 days per year.

Q5. Do you agree that the legal school attendance requirement for Traveller children should be reviewed?

Yes

Please give your reasons.

Our experience with traveller families and feedback from those concerned strongly suggests that, if the set criteria of the 100 day rule were strictly applied, the number of traveller in compliance would actually be an extremely low number. Failure to assess those families and compliance may be seen as a serious flaw in the DE recording of attendance statistics (and by inference the reliability of its equality monitoring statistics). Therefore we agree that the 100 day rule and Traveller attendance in general should be reviewed urgently.

Ambitions and Expectations

Action 5 proposes that DE and all relevant bodies such as TESS schools, Traveller Support Groups (TSGs), Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) work together to increase the ambitions, progress and prospects of Traveller pupils by:

- encouraging Traveller pupils to effectively utilise careers services
- evaluating the quality of school development planning, including processes for target setting and improving outcomes for all children
- consideration of a linkage programme with all schools to review the performance of Traveller pupils throughout the year and whether a Personal Education Plan for each Traveller pupil would be beneficial
- promoting parental involvement and assisting parents to support their child's learning.

Q6. Do you agree that the range of actions proposed will increase the ambitions, progress and prospects of Traveller children and young people?

Yes

Please give reasons.

Although we would also like to see greater reference to and the future adoption of examples of best practice that have demonstrated successful results for many years across the ROI (particularly in south Dublin) and GB. DE and TESS may consider establishing formal linkages with identified areas of good practice areas.

Q7. Are there any additional actions which you feel would help to raise ambitions, performance and prospects among Traveller pupils?

Yes

Please provide suggestions.

Traveller children and parents need to consider themselves to be an equal part of the education system. This may require innovative solutions. For example, Belfast Health Trust have employed two traveller women to work within their community as Traveller Liaison Health Workers. This has proved very successful in breaking down barriers and improving confidence within the Health Trust and Traveller community. The DE/TESS may consider a similar approach as engagement and communication are key factors if success is to be achieved.

We are cautious about the proposed overseeing arrangement via the OFMDFM Race Forum Traveller Thematic group. The apparent lack of progress against the 33 recommendations in the 1999 PSN/PSI Working Group Report may, however unfairly, undermine confidence in this group among the Traveller community and key partners. Any overseeing forum that was used would need to be comprised of senior level officials from statutory organisations and NGOs and be Chaired independently. This would provide the required transparency and accountability. Considering the inequalities shown in the statistics, any overseeing group may also benefit from representation from the Equality Commission and Human Rights Commission.

Any approach taken should be kept as simple as possible and focus on the key target areas of attendance, achievement, school availability, and staff training. These key areas need to be outcome driven and given a tight timeframe.

Inclusion, Integration and Interculturalism

Under Action 6 of the draft Framework, one of the DE proposals is to review the current practice in one Board area of providing Traveller specific school transport.

Q8. Do you agree that the practice of providing Traveller specific transport should be reviewed?

Yes

Please give reasons.

In terms of the greater Belfast area, it is essential that there is an appropriate consultation process with the families who currently use the service. Our concern is that the removal of the service will result in a further reduction in attendance.

Additional Comments

Q9. Do you have any additional suggestions or comments on the Traveller Child in Education Action Framework?

Response.

Our main concern is that the document suggests that there is “very limited additional investment” to deliver the improvements. This raises questions as to whether the actions can actually be delivered. Considering the extreme inequality for the Traveller community, as shown by the statistics, and the apparent lack of improvement within the education field since the RRO in 1997; we would have thought that resources would be prioritised to deliver this framework.

It may also help to agree priorities in the framework if current performance and practices could be benchmarked against educational statistics from the ROI and GB. This would be especially useful in the key areas of attendance (authorised and unauthorised); achievement (primary and post primary); links between education and training; employment plus achievements; and Staff training. It would also be useful to identify the current recommendation, priorities, and overseeing arrangement that exist in ROI and GB. DE and TESS may also consider establishing a specific traveller education and welfare officer team to work with families across the region. This team could, as necessary, provide support and make recommendations to help Traveller parents comply with their responsibilities and the changing face of traveller education.

We are also surprised by the comments in the equality screening document that states that the framework did not need to have a full equality impact assessment. Due to the serious issues raised by the statistics and apparent inequality, we would have expected a full impact assessment, even if this concluded that the overall impact was positive.