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The Education and Skills Bill and related matters

Raising the Leaving Age

The Government in its Education and Skills Bill intends to raise the compulsory education leaving age to eighteen, and to see all adolescents engaged in academic education, training or vocational apprenticeships. This programme will be obligatory and non-compliance could lead to prosecution.

TLRP strongly affirms its support for improving, increasing and resourcing all manner of educational and training opportunities for 16-18 year-olds, and encouraging and supporting them to access them, but considers this can and should be done without compulsion and criminalisation.

TLRP therefore opposes the introduction of a legal duty on 16 and 17 year olds to participate in education or training, and in particular opposes the ultimate option of criminal sanctions against those young people who do not comply.

Apart from the point of principle that 16 year-olds are old enough to make their own decisions, this reform would impact disproportionately on Gypsy and Traveller adolescents and be at odds with the traditional socialisation practices of in-family learning, training and employment experiences.

One matter of particular importance to many young Traveller women will be the Bill's interference with their right to choose to be full time mothers. Many Traveller women marry at age 16 or 17 and become mothers in the first year or two of marriage, and they have the legal right to choose to do so. It would, however, appear that, while an 18 year old mother has the right to be a full-time parent, a 16 or 17 year old mother does not, which raises issues of age discrimination. The insistence that any young mother in this situation should leave her young children in the care of others while attending structured education or training sessions will seem perverse to many Travellers. The Government should acknowledge that work in the home, particularly work as a mother, is every bit as valuable as work outside the home. Raising the next generation of citizens and workers is an honourable and very demanding occupation and should be recognised as such.

We welcome the assurance given by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, Baroness Morgan of Drefelin, in the House of Lords on 10 June 2008, when she noted that 'young people's lives do not run along the lines designed by civil servants and in some cases it may be difficult or even impossible for a young person to participate' in education. Baroness Morgan also said, 'The focus will be on the need to provide help and support, and first to address barriers by tailoring programmes to aid the progress of young people back into learning in a way that is right for them'. We welcome this approach and suggest that this will be a far more effective way of increasing participation in education than compulsion; we also suggest

that this sort of approach would be very productive in the whole education system from year 1. We would like to remind the government of the existing barriers of bullying and racism against Gypsies and Travellers that are common in schools and colleges, which contribute to their low attendance record. Until these sorts of barriers are dealt with, raising the education leaving age is meaningless, as a negative experience will just be prolonged.

Improving the quality of education and training

TLRP strongly supports those aspects of the Bill which commit to an increase in well-resourced, flexible and young-person-centred education, training and employment opportunities for 16-18 year-olds. We do, however, need to be reassured on how this will be delivered, as similar initiatives for 14-16 year-olds appear to be very patchy.

We welcome the letter which the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools, Lord Adonis, sent to Directors of local authority Children's Services in November 2006. In that letter, Lord Adonis set out many of the problems faced by Gypsy and Traveller children in the education system and suggested some very sensible solutions. We endorse the suggestions made in that letter.

But the letter elicited a very poor response from local authorities, and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has had to make further contact with many of them simply to obtain a reply. Many of the responses which were received had been prepared by local Traveller Education Services, which suggests that there is a danger of Lord Adonis's concerns being marginalised. This illustrates the endemic problem that has always been faced by Gypsies and Travellers in their access to appropriate services. How does the Government intend to address this reluctance by the local authorities to respond?

The experience of TLRP member group London Gypsy and Traveller Unit is that there has been no strategy in the areas in which they work on how to provide adequate, useful vocational training for the 14-16 year-olds whom the Government recognised were not benefiting from school. TLRP is concerned about how adequate, useful vocational training will be provided under the Bill for 16-18 year-olds. Currently, children and young people not benefiting from school are sent into the further education system (the least resourced sector) often resulting in classes of 40 young people identified as not compatible with schools, with possibly only two days of provision a week and very little learning being achieved. The London Gypsy and Traveller Forum 14-19 year-old sub-group started raising these concerns with a range of relevant organisations, including the Learning and Skills Council, some three years ago, and has never received adequate responses despite its persistence.

There needs to be a review of the effectiveness of the vocational opportunities offered to 14-19 year olds in recent years. If there has been no strategy on how to assist 'hard to reach' 14-16 year olds, we have little confidence that extending the age-range is going to add to the educational opportunities for Gypsies and Travellers. Introducing compulsion without a significant improvement in quality and appropriateness of provision would, in our view, be harmful. We believe that Gypsy and Traveller students who have not benefited from current education provision will, in common with others, simply not comply with any obligation to participate in education or training after their sixteenth birthday unless there is such an improvement, and will therefore be needlessly criminalised. Powers of compulsion should be withheld from local authorities until they have clearly demonstrated that they have a full and varied programme of appropriate education and training opportunities, flexibly delivered, in their area.

The Education and Skills Bill will create a duty on local authorities to assess the training needs of young people with Special Educational Needs. TLRP believes that this duty should be extended to all young people marginalised and disadvantaged within the education system, which will include Gypsies and Travellers.

We welcome the assurance given on 10 June by Baroness Morgan of Drefelin on flexible learning for young adults. She said: 'Skills accounts will provide individuals with a virtual voucher of state funding to purchase learning at a quality assured provider of their choice, which is new and very important. They will also offer a route to further support through a new adult careers and advancement service to be fully operational across England from 2010-11. Together with the continuing growth of Train to Gain, we will see a radically different model of organisation in the skills system where the role of Government is to ensure that learners and employers are empowered, well informed and well supported, so that demand can lead supply.' TLRP believes that this system would be a better way of motivating 16-18 year olds than compulsion. It may be sensible to provide all students, upon reaching the age of 16, with two years' worth of educational credits which they could use at any point in their life when they find the course or courses they want and are motivated to do.

The role of the Traveller Education Service

We believe that Traveller Education Services are essential to the provision of appropriate, good quality education to Gypsies and Travellers, and their continuing support is vital for any strategy in addressing the extreme educational disadvantage of Gypsies and Travellers. The Education and Skills Bill should oblige all local authorities to have such a service, resourced commensurate with the population identified in Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessments. Promoting 'mainstreaming' cannot happen without their expertise, support and advocacy role, both with schools and with Travellers. Without this watchdog, many children would completely drop out of the system. Traveller Education Services have been crucial in providing the only consistent long term data over 35 years on Gypsies and Travellers, which has been used by all manner of researchers. They represent an irreplaceable wealth of knowledge and experience. The experience of TLRP member groups in London is that where no Traveller Education Service exists, very poor practice is common in schools, especially concerning bullying and discrimination. Traveller Education Services should be properly resourced to promote post-16 and vocational training.

At the same time, we believe that it is vital that all TES staff have a well-informed appreciation of the possibilities of Elective Home Education and are able to assist parents in the provision of good quality education at home if that is the parents' choice and they are in a position to provide it.

Involving Traveller Education Services at a more strategic level would represent a good use of resources. The exclusion and educational failure suffered by many Gypsy and Traveller pupils presents a strong case for a national support network to maintain educational continuity and access to services. The responsibility to deliver good educational opportunities to Gypsies and Travellers should remain centrally with schools and mainstream providers working in partnership with the specialist services that the TES provide.

Consultation and involving Travellers

It is striking how few members of the public know about the proposed raising of the compulsory education leaving age and how little public debate there has been. Many Gypsies and Travellers in particular were completely unaware of a proposal that would disproportionately impact on their lives. We wonder how much consultation has taken place with any children and young people. We recommend that the DCSF should be far more pro-active in seeking a wide range of views, most importantly, the users of educational services.

In particular TLRP 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 the Department for Communities and Local Government on Gypsy and Traveller accommodation issues.

Appropriate education and training

The possibility of curricular reform is evident in a series of 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, 10 July 2007). These reforms are to be welcomed and could create a syllabus and learning experience that Gypsies and Travellers are more willing to subscribe to if new classes are imaginatively planned and well resourced. Such provision could also attract 16-18 year old Gypsies and Travellers into training courses. Attractiveness of courses on offer will have a better effect than compulsion.

A more vocational and discovery-oriented curriculum is a major desire of many Gypsy and Traveller parents for their children at the onset of adolescence. This will become even more important if the Government insists on making education and training compulsory to age 18. Training will have to be provided in a very flexible manner which takes into account patterns of travel and the ways in which many Gypsy and Traveller families make their living.

Bullying and Relationships

Schools and colleges should consider whether Gypsies and Travellers are adequately catered for by anti-bullying strategies and included in Race Equality Schemes. This should include strategies to dissuade the bullies and promote Gypsy and Traveller culture, peer support, mentoring, homework clubs and staff training.

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