

Launch of the Taskforce on Traveller Education

On Wednesday 7 December 2011, the Taskforce on Traveller Education report was launched by the Minister for Education, John O'Dowd.

The Taskforce on Traveller Education was established on 15 September 2008 recognising that "Improving the educational achievement of Travellers is a significant factor in reducing inequalities and encouraging their full inclusion in society". Its aim was to assist the Department develop an action plan on Traveller education.

The Taskforce, which met 13 times between November 2008 and June 2011, established six thematic sub-groups each of which was to make recommendations on different educational areas. The sub-group on 'Early Years and Transitions' was chaired by an Early Years Toybox staff member. Three other Early Years Toybox members contributed to the following sub-groups – 'Primary Education', 'Special Educational Needs' and 'Inter-Culturalism and Racism'.

Toybox was launched in 2003 to overcome the inequalities in education, health and well-being which exist between Travellers and the rest of the population in Northern Ireland. It is currently funded by the Department of Education and delivered by Early Years – the organisation for young children. The aim of the Toybox Project is to ensure Traveller children and families have access to high quality inclusive early education and family support. It works in partnership with children and parents to provide a rights-based outreach service which aims to significantly reduce social and educational inequalities experienced by Traveller children aged 0–4.

The Taskforce report contains many recommendations which include the following:

- The continuation of Toybox to support Traveller children and parents.
- Improved communication between agencies, with all professionals feeding in relevant information to Toybox workers.
- The production and distribution of the DVD 'My Child' to encourage more Traveller children to engage in Toybox from the age of two onwards.
- A draft action plan should be developed by the end of 2011 which "must grasp the opportunity to deliver real progress for Traveller children".
- The educational attainment of Travellers "needs to be addressed in the context of a holistic approach with other agencies to tackle barriers to Traveller equality and inclusion".

As highlighted in the recommendations, Toybox continues to offer support to all Traveller children aged 0–4 across Northern Ireland and work in conjunction with other agencies. The Toybox DVD 'My Child' highlights all the learning opportunities that children can engage in before formal education begins at P1. It captures the many positive experiences Traveller parents have had in relation to early years education. It can also be used as a model of good practice for everyone.

Northern Ireland Executive Website

<http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news-de-071211-odowd-launches-report>