

## Opening Statement

I thank the committee for the opportunity to attend. When people speak of Travellers it is my experience that we as Travellers are rarely the ones that are speaking and ever rarer, the ones that are heard.

I am currently manager of St Oliver's Education Centre in Cloverhill, we mainly engage with adults over the age of 18 and those that engage with the centre are predominantly from the Travelling community – many of the newer students are the ones that were young when such draconian cuts were made to Traveller specific resources, in 2011/2012 the visiting teachers service for Travellers was disbanded, resource teachers for Travellers ended, cuts to the 1.5hr additional teacher hours per child took place and all Senior Traveller Training Centres were closed, without a suitable alternative.

The continued effects of the cuts, compressed with low expectations and the systems either disinterest or difficulty in engaging with Travellers, through a settled narrative, continue to reflect itself in the daily lives of young people.

At this stage the committee must be incredibly aware of the statistics surrounding Travellers in general as well as those of education – but I will again repeat them, as while they are numbers, they are also people's lives:

*According to the CSO 2016 Census, just 13.3% of Traveller females have an upper secondary level education, nearly 6 in every 10 Traveller males were educated to primary level at most and only 167 Travellers have a third level qualification.*

*Also, according to the ERSI 'A social Portrait of Travellers report from 2017, Travellers are 50 times more likely to leave school without the Leaving Certificate and only 9% of those aged between 25-34 have completed second level education.*

There exist a misconception within the wider community that Travellers do not value education, this is not true – there exists within all people the desire to prosper, grow and learn and the doorways created by education are ones greatly valued and desired by Travellers, however many of these doorways can be locked to us.

They can be locked by the under provision of accommodation, they can be locked to us by the consequences of poverty, they can be locked to us when education strategies remain just strategies and when those doorways are even considered not for us and when opened, they sometimes know either very little about us or lot about us in error.

Currently there are programmes in place in regards to third level education for Travellers and these are much needed and warmly welcomed, however they will that they will be little more than bandages on deep wounds when the vast majority of Travellers do not finish secondary level.

For Travellers who do leave the education system early, it is for the majority within the secondary level – additional strategies and programmes need to be placed here also in order to support retention and completion.

We also need to be more aware of intersectionality within the community and create robust programmes that include and support intersectionality.

Currently NTRIS has only one action in regards to disabilities, action 12, which seeks to facilitate

children into pre-school. The ESRI report also states that with age comparison that 10% of Travellers have a learning disability, 13% experience mobility limitations and 11% have difficulty in getting to school or work due to a long-term condition or disability.

A bright blessings of my life has been through the involvement of the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill, a bill that seeks to be part of the process in ensuring schools are safer places for Traveller children, in which our identities will not be denied, reduced or removed and one in which all children and young people learn about who we really are, not only as an attempt to remove the biases and suspicion that we live with, but reflects a truer Ireland.

Since 2001 the NCCA have made recommendations to include Traveller Culture and History within the curriculum, however alongside a recent NCCA audit it has proven that these recommendations have largely failed, with only two optional modules in the senior cycle being directly inclusive of Travellers.

I understand that the Minister of Education remains very open to the process and I feel that we must step away from the charity of potentially being included, to the assured that we will – as sadly, time has shown that when Travellers are optional, we are not chosen and to do otherwise places the weight of education of students, teachers and structures onto the shoulders of children.

We also need to ensure that intercultural awareness training should be mandatory for teachers, regardless of who they are teaching as there are a wide array of opinions and practices people can have both deliberately and unconsciously that can be devastating to the young.

Education should be in a place of safety, it should be aware, it should be accessible and it should be for all – programmes help, projects can bring some opportunities for progression but without a authentic structural change we will be forever an add on – our children and yours deserve better than that.