

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community

Organisation: AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation

Names of persons making opening statement: Tara Farrell (AONTAS Chairperson); Cathleen McDonagh Clark (Exchange House Ireland: National Travellers Service [Exchange House is an AONTAS member organisation])

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Date of written submission: 19 November 2019

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The five minutes allocated to AONTAS for the opening statement is split between Tara Farrell and Cathleen McDonagh Clark.

Tara Farrell-Opening First Statement

Good morning. My name is Tara Farrell, Chairperson of AONTAS and I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to address you today.

AONTAS is a non-governmental membership organisation established in 1969 with over 500 members from across the lifelong learning spectrum. Our mission is to advocate for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning. We place a particular emphasis on those who did not benefit from education when they were young or who are under-represented in learning and we know from various research over the years that low participation rates of the Traveller Community in education begin at an early age and continue into adulthood.

The purpose of our submission was firstly to highlight the historic policy context which is well known by members of the committee, e.g. Brian Harvey's research in 2013 on the impact of spending cuts on Traveller Education between 2008 and 2013. We also examine the contemporary policy context, e.g. the 2017 ESRI report 'A Social Portrait of Travellers in Ireland' and the 2019 Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Education Inequality and Disadvantage and Barriers to Education.

In terms of broader policy context, in August, AONTAS welcomed the 2019 Eurostat figures which measures Ireland's adult learning participation rate at 12.5%. While this indication of greater participation is positive, it is important to note that this calculation of adult learning participation excludes Travellers living in Traveller-specific accommodation.

You will also be aware of the European Commission 'Upskilling Pathways' initiative which seeks to provide new learning pathways for all citizens but with a focus identified by Government on building pathways to learning for marginalised groups, including the Traveller Community.

Community education is adult learning which takes place in local community settings across Ireland, delivered by professionally run organisations. It has phenomenal scope - it supports participation in accredited and non-accredited programmes, it builds skills and confidence, it overcomes barriers to participation. It addresses inequality. It meets policy priorities – increasing lifelong learning participation, upskilling, is socially inclusive and improves wellbeing in the individual and in communities. Community education supports the equality of access to education for underrepresented groups, including learners from the Traveller Community and is a particularly effective way of reaching those who are most distant from education. Its supportive environment increases engagement of those who have had previous negative experiences of the formal education system. Community education acts as a first step back to education where learners receive the wrap-around supports that allow them to participate fully in their learning journey.

We know the benefits of community education in terms of overcoming barriers to education and increasing wellbeing so we also must highlight the disproportionate cuts experienced by the sector over the last decade which curtails providers in responding effectively to the needs of marginalised communities such as the Traveller Community. Therefore we firstly ask the Joint Committee to support the recommendation of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills' 2019 Report on Education inequality & disadvantage and Barriers to Education to support community education both through increased funding, and to achieve parity of esteem with other sectors in the formal education system.

In the context of this presentation and our submission we also have a number of recommendations:

- a. Review the impact of cuts to Traveller education since 2008
- b. Highlight positive role models and success stories of Travellers who have participated in education and are helping their community
- c. Address non-education barriers to engagement in education like housing and childcare
- d. Support access by Travellers to accredited adult education courses.
- e. Support community education financially and structurally as an equal part of the education system.

Cathleen McDonagh Clark-Opening Second Statement

Hello and thank you for the time to speak with the Joint Committee today. My name is Cathleen McDonagh Clark. I am here in my role as Education and Training Service Manager with Exchange House Ireland: National Traveller Service. Exchange House is a member organisation of AONTAS and I would like to thank them for highlighting the voice of our organisation specifically and of educators working with the Traveller community more broadly.

My image of education is like keys to the door. Education should and must be about unlocking human potential. When I say this I do not mean that we will just unlock the potential of an individual, but that we can, must, and will unlock the potential of Ireland.

As an educator working with the Travelling community and as a member of the Travelling community myself I am speaking both professionally and personally. The challenges that this committee is exploring have been in existence for decades and yet have not been remedied. Issues of educational participation and engagement in education remain low and this continues into employment. Together we must work to ensure that opportunities available to the rest of Ireland are available to Travellers across the country.

To see change there are practical solutions available that we all know about:

First is that funding for education and the wrap-around supports like childcare, transportation, and housing must be increased and spent. As Tara spoke of, the Education and Skills Committee's own 2019 Report on the Barriers to education highlights that without the basic needs of a person being met, we cannot expect to see them succeed.

Second is that we must acknowledge and address the history on our island of prejudice toward the Travelling community. We must work as Travellers and settled alike to understand each other's histories and places on this island. Without understanding our histories and ongoing discrimination that is too often based in fear, we as educators and policy makers won't be able to believe in a different reality that allows for positive change. The only people that can make that reality is us.

Third is that we must make access to education flexible. We must ensure that educational opportunity is accessible and that it meets the needs of the communities we are serving. If we continue a system of education like we have, which is built around what makes sense on Marlborough and Merrion Streets then we won't succeed. We must build a system that unlocks doors for people and welcomes them inside, which always recognises the individual and what they can contribute to the community, society and our country.

I'd like to finish now with a story of personal experience. I am a woman from the Travelling community. My mother left school early but she and my father instilled in me a passion for learning. As I grew up I engaged with the education system after leaving secondary school early. Thankfully I was supported financially to participate. Without financial support from the state I wouldn't be here today. However the greatest barrier I faced was of a system who didn't see my potential, and my greatest support were the people who did. To see positive change in Ireland we need to see the potential in everyone, whether Traveller, settled, migrant, or otherwise. If we don't see that potential and support that potential we will be doing a financial and social disservice to ourselves and the country.

Thank you.