

## Joint Oireachtas Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community

20<sup>th</sup> April 2021

### ***Opening statement***

Thank you Chair, and good afternoon everybody...and thank you for inviting my colleagues and I here today to discuss our work in this area.

My name is Shirley Comerford and I am the CEO of the Public Appointments Service.

I am joined here today by Aoife Lyons, Head of Assessment Services and Cathriona Tumelty, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (ED&I) Partner.

It is an opportune time to talk about the recruitment of the Traveller community, given the recent launch of our first ED&I strategy, but also in light of last week's report *'Travellers in the Mainstream Labour Market'* which was launched by Minister Joe O'Brien on behalf of St. Stephens Green Trust, which outlined the significant employment gap between Travellers and non-Travellers.

I welcome this chance to hear the insights of this Committee into these important matters and for our organisation to demonstrate and establish our intention to address it, both in our work to date and our future plans.

As outlined in the submission paper, PAS are the recruiter for client organisations in the civil and public service. We source candidates for roles in the Civil Service, Local Authorities, an Garda Síochána and a range of management and specialist roles across the civil and public service. Additionally, we play a key role in identifying members for State Boards. In our work of sourcing, assessing and delivering candidates to our clients, we are committed to equality of opportunity for all people who wish to pursue a career in the public service.

Despite this commitment, we are all too aware that the levels of recruitment and employment of Travellers in the public service is deeply unsatisfactory. The report launched last week cited 80% unemployment of Travellers. In our own submission you will have seen that for our 2018 Temporary Clerical competition we had just 21 applications from people who identified as being a member of the Traveller community. The figures are, frankly, much too low and unacceptable. It is incumbent on us as a public sector recruiter, to proactively extend the hand of outreach, to listen to the challenges and to enable access and participation from Travellers to a much greater extent.

Our first ED&I strategy, launched last month, identifies three strategic priorities broadly focusing on attaining greater knowledge and understanding of the Irish public sector workforce, recruitment and selection processes that enable access for diverse candidates and modelling best practice in ED&I, while collaborating with clients, to create inclusive work environments. This strategy is the product of a significant consultation process, including input from representatives for the Traveller community, and provides a framework for addressing key challenges in a systematic and sustainable way.

The Irish Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty rightly places an onus on public sector bodies to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of their employees, customers, service users, and everyone affected by their policies and plans. I understand and appreciate why a focus on ED&I is increasingly important against the backdrop of growing diversity in Ireland. We know a public service that is energised and enriched by the contribution of employees from all sectors of society supports the delivery of more responsive and inclusive public services. We need to recognise and design workplaces that embrace and celebrate that diversity; as the main recruiters for the civil service, this is particularly important for PAS. Inclusive workplace cultures also play a key role in attracting and retaining people from diverse backgrounds, driving business and team performance and supporting collaboration and innovation. We want to collaborate with our partners and colleagues in the civil and public service to ensure that strong, developed, inclusive work culture, so that we can be confident when recruiting people from marginalised communities that they are going into enabling environments where they can realise their full potential and bring their 'whole selves' to work.

There is much to do. There has been good work to date, but we acknowledge that we need to do more. The area of diversity and inclusion has seen increased attention and support over the past number of years, with a greater imperative to address the need to increase visible representation in the public sector, and enhanced understanding of the benefits for service provision for all the people of Ireland. Recruiting and employing a diverse public sector workforce that is reflective of the communities it serves is not just about the moral imperative; the right thing to do – there is also a significant social, political and cultural imperative to have a public sector that mirrors the composition of our society. We also appreciate the positive impact employment has not just for the individual but for their families and communities which include benefits beyond monetary considerations. For Travellers, this goes beyond employment opportunities – it is about having access, presence and participation in the venues and arenas where discussions, decisions, and social policy-making that impact on us all are taking place.

We outlined in our paper some of the work that we have done in this space. We have held workshops with Traveller organisations to provide guidance and information on our application and recruitment process. We have advertised employment opportunities in Traveller publications such as the '*Traveller Voice*' magazine, and engaged with Jobs Ireland to ensure people on the live register are aware of our recruitment activity. We are pleased to support the Department of Justice in its internship for Travellers. In line with the National Traveller and Roma Community Inclusion Strategy (2017-2021), the Department of Justice will this year initiate a one year work experience programme for members of the Traveller and Roma communities, with roles at clerical and executive officer level. The PAS will support participants through the provision of a career clinic at the latter stage of the programme, with dedicated, tailored sessions covering how to best prepare for different elements of a recruitment process.

Becoming an active partner and sponsoring the Traveller Education awards for the first time last year is, I hope, the beginning of a long-standing partnership which will facilitate increased engagement with the Traveller community while allowing us to promote public sector careers.

We have more to learn. Participating on St. Stephen's Green Trust Traveller Employment and Enterprise Policy Programme (TEEPP) Advisory Group enhanced our understanding of barriers to employment while working with other relevant stakeholders to develop opportunities to increase

access. Their report on Travellers in the Mainstream Labour Market gives valuable insights into the experience of Travellers in the workplace. We need to increase our outreach to hear directly from Travellers the challenges they encounter in accessing employment, and the difficulties they encounter when they do enter the workplace. We must continually challenge our own thinking. Increasing our engagement with traveller organisations to better understand the perceptions of the public service and the lived experience of recruitment and employment. We will build more relationships and nurturing those already formed. Our new ED&I strategy places a key emphasis on engagement with underrepresented groups, and we are eager to continue and expand the scope of our work within this framework.

This will not be a quick fix. I am acutely aware that our ED&I strategy on its own is a document, and to give effect and achieve our ambition will take a lot of work. We need a concerted effort, collaborating with key stakeholders across the civil and public service, to bring about sustainable change, while being mindful of the need to find ways to accelerate progress. We understand the significant role we play as a recruiter, while acknowledging that we are one element of the cohesive response that is required.

There is a phrase that is often used in the disability sector – ‘Nothing about us without us’. This is applicable across the entire diversity spectrum. Travellers themselves need to be at the centre of decision-making, of policy considerations, of legislation development, to ensure real change. Our goal as the recruiter for the civil and public service is to enable them to be present in these spheres.

We welcome this opportunity to talk to you today....this is a really useful forum to invoke self-reflection and critique and challenge us to think about how we are doing things. We look forward to the Committee’s views.

**WRITTEN SUBMISSION BY MS SHIRLEY COMERFORD, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS SERVICE TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY – JANUARY 2021**

The Joint Committee have asked that I make a written submission, on behalf of the Public Appointments Service, on the topic of Traveller employment and labour market participation, having regard to the unemployment rate of 80% among Travellers.

**1. Introduction**

1.1 The Public Appointments Service is the recruitment and resourcing service provider for client organisations in the civil and public service. We are responsible for the sourcing, assessment and delivery of quality candidates to public service clients. We run a wide range of ‘openly advertised’ recruitment competitions and ‘interdepartmental’ promotion competitions within the Civil Service. Our activities are primarily focused on the sourcing of candidates for roles in the Civil Service; the most senior roles in Local Authorities; trainee Garda for An Garda Síochána; and a range of management, executive and specialist roles across the civil and public service. The Public Appointments Service also has a key role in the identification of suitable members for State Boards.

1.2 Recruitment to the civil service and a range of other public bodies operates under the provisions of the Public Service Management (Recruitment and Appointments) Acts, 2004 to 2013. The Public Appointments Service operates under licence from the Commission for Public Service Appointments (CPSA) and is independent in its operations. In carrying out our recruitment and selection processes, we comply with the Codes of Practice published by the CPSA, which ensure that fair and open processes are in place. Where the Codes do not apply, we adhere to the same core principles in carrying out our functions.

1.3 The Public Appointments Service is committed to equality of opportunity for all those who wish to pursue a career in the public service. We are committed to ensuring that no unnecessary barriers are imposed on access to public service careers. Candidates applying for clerical and temporary clerical roles are not required to provide evidence of educational attainment, providing wider access to job opportunities for candidates from a diversity of backgrounds. Recent changes to the selection process at this junior entry level has also dispensed with the need for candidates to complete psychometric tests as

candidates now complete a questionnaire which is focussed on their skills and experience.

1.4 The recent transition to online selection processes and remote interviewing has made it easier for candidates to engage with the process. Candidates can now compete from their own home and it is no longer necessary for them to travel to our offices. Providing more convenient access has led to a considerable increase in those attending for their scheduled interviews. Candidates engaging with remote selection processes are provided with significant support, including guidance on remote interviewing and how to prepare for their interview. We also provide guidance on how to use the technology and provide an opportunity to do a pre-interview test of the system with a staff member.

## **2. Development of our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Expertise and a Strategic Approach**

2.1 PAS is conscious, in its role as a public sector recruiter, to ensure that candidates apply for roles in the public sector in the knowledge that appointments are made on merit, through a fair, open and transparent process. We are also aware of the need for a public sector that is reflective of the society it serves. We have therefore had a strong focus in recent years on building our expertise in the areas of equality, diversity and inclusion, in order to advance those goals in a professional and structured manner.

2.2 We appointed our first dedicated Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I) Lead (at senior management level) in 2019 and established an ED&I team to support her in that role. Our initial focus was on developing our first ED&I Strategy and action plan, which involved wide consultation and the guidance of an Expert Advisory Board. The Advisory Board played a critical role in bringing an external challenge to our thinking, with expert views and perspectives from a range of different organisations and backgrounds. We also held focus groups targeting people with an interest in, or specific role related to, equality, diversity, inclusion, recruitment or employment in civil and public service and not-for-profit organisations. Pavee Point, Involve, Travellers in Prison Initiative (SSGT) and St. Stephens Green Trust (SSGT) attended one of these focus groups.

2.3 Our ED&I Strategy is due to be launched early this year. At its core, the strategy seeks to engender and support a diverse public service that reflects the communities it serves. Its three strategic priorities focus on building greater knowledge and

understanding of the composition of the Irish public sector workforce; recruitment and selection processes that enable access for diverse candidates, and collaborating with clients to create inclusive work environments underpinned by best practice in ED&I. Increased, targeted and informed outreach with relevant representative organisations and potential candidates will give the reciprocal benefits of helping us to better understand existing employment barriers, as well as providing an avenue to demystify the application process and generate awareness of public sector employment opportunities. Evaluating our systems and processes with an ED&I lens will also facilitate the dissemination of ED&I knowledge and experience into our practices, policies and training, helping to embed accessibility and inclusion. PAS aim to demonstrate leadership through modelling best practice ED&I in our workplace culture, which will foster and support inclusion not only within our own organisation but more broadly throughout the civil and public service. It is critical that workplaces visibly support inclusion in order to encourage and retain staff from diverse backgrounds.

2.4 Our ED&I Strategy encompasses insights from our ED&I Forum, which is a cross-organisational staff engagement group established in 2019 and highlighted initial areas for action. It is envisaged that the Forum will evolve and strengthen, playing an oversight role in the strategy's implementation.

2.5 Developing our People, Culture and Organisation is a key pillar of our NUA23 Strategy and we understand that success and strong performance can only be achieved by supporting our people and creating an inclusive and collaborative working environment. We highly value a workplace culture that embodies equality, diversity and inclusion and want to lead by example. PAS is committed to fulfilling our legislative obligations under the Equality legislation, promoting equality of opportunity and prohibiting discrimination in the workplace across the nine grounds. PAS has an internal policy on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, which sets out our commitment to embedding inclusive recruitment and working practices across the organisation. In 2020, PAS staff engaged in the following sessions to support the development of ED&I capability and reinforce our commitment to ED&I:

- Accessibility Digital Content Training
- How to Combat Unconscious Bias
- Assistive Technology
- Remote On-Boarding for candidates with disabilities
- Mental Health and Returning to Work
- Disclosure - Bringing Your Whole Self to Work

- Inclusion International: WEBINAR: LISTEN, INCLUDE, RESPECT
- Disability at Work - Opportunities and Challenges in the New Normal
- Intersectionality & Coming Out at Work' Online Conversation
- Valuing Different Women in the Workplace
- Supporting Remote Work for Employees with Disabilities
- ILO Global Business and Disability Network (GBDN) 2020 - Workplace Adjustment and Making Remote Working Work

2.6 The move to digital marketing in 2020 has provided the opportunity for more targeted advertising of opportunities to a more diverse audience. For a number of our large-scale general entry campaigns, PAS has engaged with Jobs Ireland to ensure people on the live register are aware of the opportunities available for careers in the Civil and Public Service and to enhance the diversity of our applicant pools.

2.7 Training is available to all board members, a large part of which is ensuring that they understand their responsibility to ensure equality of opportunity and to prevent the impact of unconscious bias.

### **3. ED&I Related External Engagement**

3.1 Our approach to outreach engagement has included workshops and seminars with targeted groups to ensure sufficient knowledge and capacity among potential applicants. Our drive to attract a diverse candidate pool is evident in the promotion of public service opportunities across a range of communities, via ethnic and community based publications and social media platforms (Polish, Lithuanian, Romanian, Latvian, Brazilian, etc.).

3.2 In 2020, we engaged with an external consultant to work with us on exploring reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities throughout the candidate journey, from attraction to assignment and beyond. A number of action areas were identified, including areas such as enhanced communication that encourages sharing of information; streamlining and diversity proofing our processes; and building internal capability and capacity. Cross-functional teams will work on the action areas identified, with relevant actions being identified in each units' business plans for 2021. While this project focused specifically on candidates with disabilities, it is fair to say that enhancements made in this regard will also benefit other candidate groups, including

Travellers, in terms of improving accessibility and, as an extension, participation in recruitment campaigns.

3.3 We recognise the importance of early intervention approach to broaden our outreach in schools and ethnic communities to raise awareness, educate about the role of the Civil and Public Service and highlight the career opportunities available. We have received funding to develop our engagement with secondary schools in 2021.

3.4 PAS recognises the important role we hold to attract and promote access to public service careers to members of the Traveller community. To this end, we have engaged in a number of initiatives and have identified pathways within our forthcoming ED&I strategy to increase outreach with diverse candidate pools.

#### **4. Initiatives Specific to the Traveller Community**

4.1 In late 2019 PAS was invited, by St. Stephen's Green Trust (SSGT), to participate on the Traveller Programme and Enterprise Policy Programme (TEEPP) Advisory Group. A strategic goal of SSGT is to contribute to increased participation of Travellers in employment and enterprise, through gaining a better understanding of the cultural specificities of Travellers in employment and enterprise and the role of employers in supporting access, and Traveller experience of same. To this end, a part-time Policy Officer was recruited by SSGT to manage the TEEPP. The Advisory Group was established to give guidance on the strategic direction of the TEEPP; guiding the formulation of its annual work programme and activities and support its Policy Officer in developing links and relationships with relevant organisations and networks. Membership of the Group included the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), Business in the Community (BITC) and Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP), and Traveller representative organisations. The TEEPP concluded at the end of 2020, earlier than envisaged – this was brought about by a range of factors within a Covid context, including an unstable and uncertain employment landscape and the deferral of central policy measures central to its work. However, in its one year of operation the TEEPP made eight policy submissions to strategies currently in development, facilitated the development of relations between service providers (Special Initiatives for Travellers (SIT), Local Employment Services, trade union movement, etc.) to support best practice, and commissioned research on the

direct experience of Travellers in relation to access to, and progression within, mainstream employment, which is envisaged to be finalised by end January. This qualitative research which includes inputs from Travellers, employers and trade unions will augment the understanding of a wide range of stakeholders of the complexity of issues and barriers experienced by Travellers, and how to advance this issue. It is envisaged that this research will be published later this year.

4.2 In July 2020, PAS met with the Open Doors Initiative, who provide employment supports for marginalised groups (including Travellers) including training, apprenticeships and community supports. This reciprocal information exchange allowed PAS to hear about the engagement this group were having with the wider public service, and provided an opportunity for expanding awareness of the range of opportunities within public service recruitment. PAS reinforced that the Executive Officer competition would be commencing shortly, and asked that Open Doors advise their client base of same.

4.3 PAS is also supporting the Traveller internship programme that is currently being run by the Department of Justice. This internship will open for applications in January 2021, with a view to having two Clerical Officers and two Executive Officers from the Traveller Community join the Department of Justice for a period of 11 months from April/May. PAS will deliver a career module at the latter end of the programme. This module will help prepare the interns for applying for permanent roles, and will cover such topics as how to complete application forms/CVs, interview skills, etc.

4.4 PAS also sought to generate awareness of the internship programme to enhance application numbers by directly emailing the programme information, including details on how to apply, to all of the Traveller representative organisations on our database, covering a national geographic spread. PAS also sent all information on it to St. Stephen's Green Trust, asking that they issue it to all of the Traveller organisations they have as contacts.

4.5 PAS have engaged with the internship coordinator to discuss the potential for alternative routes to employment from internships. Existing models such as the Oireachtas Work Learning (OWL) Programme for people with intellectual disabilities, which provides for permanent employment in the civil service after an 11 month training programme, and the Willing, Able, Mentoring (WAM) Programme for graduates with disabilities, on which PAS are currently working with DPER and AHEAD to develop routes to permanency for participants, provide a basis on which to explore possibilities for

employment of Travellers within the public service. The previous Traveller Intern Programme, run in 2008, did not have such a route to permanent employment and PAS had no way of retaining the two interns who successfully completed the programme in PAS, despite a desire to do so.

4.6 Creating awareness of opportunities through engagement with representative groups is critical in attracting diverse applicants, including Travellers. There is an increased focus, as evidenced in our forthcoming ED&I strategy, on data and how that can be used to better understand our candidate profile in competitions and how our engagement strategies are working. At present, of the only 255 candidates registered with our website (publicjobs.ie) have declared that they are members of the Traveller Community and only 141 of those have applied for public service roles with PAS in recent years. The provision of this data is voluntary and is only used to track percentages of diverse groups in the recruitment process to ensure there are no barriers to entry. However, the number of applicants providing the additional data is very small and a group has been established to PAS to increase engagement with this element of the process and provide reassurance as to the use of this data. Without this data, PAS cannot track that its efforts in terms of ED&I are contributing to an increase in the diversity profile of the public service and the numbers applying for public service jobs.

4.7 In December 2018, we delivered a workshop in Pavee Point to highlight PAS services, and had a specific focus on the Temporary Clerical Officer 2018 competition, which was open for applications at the time. Up to 30 members of the Traveller Community were provided with individual assistance and support in registering a profile on the PAS website and submitting an application for the Temporary Clerical Officer competition. For that competition, we had 21 (0.27%) candidates self-declare as members of the Traveller Community from 7,750 candidates.

4.8 We have also used specialist publications to target the Traveller Community for particular recruitment campaigns which may be of interest. This included advertising the Recruit Prison Officer in the Travellers Voice magazine.

4.9 We also recognise the importance of visibly supporting and promoting public service careers for the Traveller Community. In October 2019, we attended the National Traveller Educational Achievement awards to promote and highlight career opportunities in the Public and Civil Service. In 2020, we sponsored the Traveller Education awards for

the first time, with an aim to develop this as a long-term partnership to allow for increased engagement with the Traveller Community.

4.10 PAS has also met with Exchange House Ireland in early 2020, who provide front-line and support services to Travellers. Among items discussed were the Temporary Clerical Officer competition and the development of short work experience placements in PAS for members of the Traveller Community who are in educational programmes. Unfortunately, this cannot be progressed further until PAS are back in Chapter House as it would be impossible to provide work experience placements in the current remote environment. However, once PAS is back on-site this programme will commence.

4.11 PAS also met with Involve, who are the main provider of youth work services for Travellers throughout Ireland, in November 2019. Employment has been identified as an important aspect as successful outcomes here would have positive knock-on effects in other areas impacting the Traveller community.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

5.1 It is evident that there are many challenges and barriers to enhancing Traveller access to employment. For instance, the level of educational attainment among the Traveller community may be a barrier for access to recruitment competitions with specified educational qualification criteria. There is a need for ongoing communication with Traveller groups, through the existing networks established, in order to identify any barriers and provide supports where these exist. Gaining a greater understanding of these barriers, in tandem with engendering an inclusive work culture, are central tenets of our ED&I strategy. This knowledge and understanding will support us to enhance our recruitment processes and practices to be more easily accessible and inclusive, not only for members of the Traveller community, but also for a range of marginalised groups.

5.2 There is also a need for our clients to consider the education and other requirements that they specify as essential for roles that they request PAS to fill. PAS (and the CPSA) have emphasised that only requirements which are essential to carry out a role should be specified in Job Specifications and it is critical that all public service employers consider potential equality and diversity implications when they are setting such requirements and do not create unnecessary barriers to employment.

5.3 It is clear that alternative routes to employment, such as apprenticeships, work placements, internships, etc. would be extremely beneficial in raising Traveller participation in the public service workforce. Progress in this area is being made, as seen in the pilot internship initiative being run by Department of Justice. However, in order to provide a robust pathway to ongoing employment with security of tenure, routes to permanency, as provided for in other recruitment models for under-represented groups, should be incorporated into such programmes. In addition, roles should have flexibility in terms of conditions and duties, which will allow them to be tailored to the needs and skills of the Traveller Community.

5.4 Greater use could be made of work experience programmes in the civil and public service tailored to the Traveller Community so that there is greater understanding of the range of roles on offer and that they are open to all those with the relevant skills. If these are offered to transition year students, it may encourage such students to stay in school and may help guide their subject choices and any decisions made in terms of third level education.

5.5 PAS also plans to use the Schools Advertising Challenge programme it is rolling out in 2021 to engage with students, inclusive of young people from all backgrounds, about careers in the public service, using an innovative, engaging and activity based approach that taps into 21st Century skills and peer-to-peer engagement. As part of this project, PAS is specifically targeting disadvantaged schools to try to increase awareness of public service careers across society.