



Presentation to the Oireachtas Committee on Issues Affecting the Traveller Community (May 4th)

Travellers in the Mainstream Labour Market: Situation, Identity and Experience Research

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We would like to thank the Chair and members of the Committee for giving us the opportunity to address you today, on the issue of Traveller employment pathways, and specifically, on the findings of the qualitative research we were commissioned to undertake on behalf of St. Stephen's Green Trust.

## Context

Our research is presented in a context of significant low levels of employment and unfulfilled employment aspirations of Travellers. The significant employment gap between Travellers and non-Travellers has been well documented:

- Census 2016 data indicate that the unemployment rate for Travellers, at 80%, is six times that of the general population.<sup>1</sup>
- The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, in its 2020 survey, found that, in comparison to the five other EU countries surveyed, Irish Travellers had the highest level of reported discrimination in seeking employment in the previous year and previous five years (38% and 70% of respondents respectively).<sup>2</sup>

The research fills a gap in exploring the experiences of Travellers who, despite many barriers, have successfully navigated a pathway into and through mainstream employment. It is qualitative in nature, and involved in-depth one-to-one interviews with 15 Traveller men and women, whose ages range from late 20s to late 50s. In addition to the interviews with Travellers, seven employers were interviewed (from the private, public, and social economy sectors) as well as three senior civil servants and two social partners (trade union and business sector).

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<sup>1</sup> [Census 2016, Profile 8: Irish Travellers, Central Statistics Office.](#)

<sup>2</sup> EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020). [Roma and Travellers in Six Countries.](#) The six countries surveyed were: Ireland, France, Belgium, UK, Netherlands, and Sweden.

## **Research Findings**

The interviews with Travellers indicate a range of enabling factors and barriers that impact on the employment pathways of members of the Traveller community, in regard to: getting work ready, accessing employment, and developing and progressing in employment.

### ***Getting work ready***

Enablers identified:

- The role of local Traveller organisations and other community organisations in providing opportunities for personal and skills development.
- Social economy enterprises established by Traveller groups have served not only as places of employment for Travellers, but as launching pads for further employment opportunities based on the skills developed.
- ETB provision, local community centres providing further education and training courses, and third-level access programmes enabled education gaps to be addressed.
- Traveller-specific internships in the public sector enabling a gearing up for employment.

Barriers identified:

- Delayed completion of their education. Early school leaving tended to be primarily due to negative experiences in school (racism – mainly from peers – coupled with low expectations from teachers).
- Difficulties in getting work experience as students which blocked access to and progression in certain academic courses requiring such experience.

### ***Accessing employment***

Enablers identified:

- Having someone to connect them to their first job opportunity. These connectors included: family links with an enterprise; teachers; staff in local Traveller organisations; and employment support workers in Local Development Companies or Traveller organisations.

Barriers identified:

- Lack of connections and networks to secure the first foothold into employment.
- Discrimination at the point of recruitment.
- Caring responsibilities.
- Potential loss of secondary benefits.

## ***Development and progression in employment***

Enablers identified:

- A supportive work culture that is family-friendly, teamwork based, and empowering. Family-friendly was vital in meeting childcare demands and responding to family-related concerns,
- A supportive line manager: particularly important in the context of an employee being the only Traveller in the organisation,
- Workplaces where anti-racism and intercultural training and awareness for staff was a regular feature.

Barriers identified:

- Harassment, principally taking the form of micro-aggressions such as hostile conversations being overheard, or being patronised. This was viewed as subtle and therefore difficult to challenge.
- Not feeling able to be open about their Traveller identity at work.
- Low employer expectations, and limited opportunities to develop skills at work.

## **Research Recommendations**

Travellers need to be named in and a focus for general employment and labour market policies. Key emerging opportunities for this are: the new Pathways to Work strategy being developed and the review of the National Social Enterprise Policy.

Targeted measures that flow from this naming of Travellers in such general policies could be driven through the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, which itself will need to be reviewed on foot of the new EU Roma Integration Framework.

Underpinning this policy strategy would be the full and effective implementation of the public sector equality and human rights duty across employment and enterprise policy makers and service delivery. This should include use of an ethnic identifier to track and analyse the progress made.

Specific initiatives recommended include:

- New channels into the workplace need to be put in place with a programme of public sector internships (including government departments, local authorities and public bodies like the HSE) at national and local level.
- A network of Traveller employment liaison workers should be funded through Department of Social Protection and located in such as the Local Employment Service and the Local Development Companies.
- Peer-led services in the health sector are an important current source of employment for Travellers. Steps should be taken to enable progression from

these settings into the jobs in the wider health service and to more widely establish such peer-led services in the education and accommodation sector.

- Social enterprise opportunities should be made more widely available to Travellers through targeted awareness campaigns and tailored supports for the establishment of Traveller-led social enterprises.
- New guidance and supports should be developed for employers and a targeted programme of capacity building should be pursued with the social partners, to deepen an understanding of Travellers and Traveller culture and Traveller labour market aspirations and the barriers they face.