

Presentation by Anne Costello, Coordinator, Travellers in Prison Initiative (TPI), St Stephen's Green Trust and Martin Ward, Manager, Bounce Back Recycling

Introduction

We would like to thank the Chair, Senator Eileen Flynn and members of the Committee for giving us the opportunity to address you today, on the issue of Positive Action in Employment for Travellers and other under-represented groups.

The Travellers in Prison Initiative (TPI) is a St Stephen's Green Trust (SSGT) programme and is part-funded by the SSGT, The Irish Prison Service (IPS) and The Probation Service.

Its overall aim is to embed changes in policy and practice that have a positive influence on Travellers in prison, their families and communities.

Context

You heard over past weeks about the stark unemployment situation for Travellers from others including St Stephen's Green Trust, Values Lab and the Galway Traveller Movement.

Today we want to focus on possible practical solutions to improve employment rates among Travellers.

I am particularly pleased to introduce Martin Ward from the Galway Traveller Movement who manages Bounce Back Recycling (BBR), a social enterprise employing 16 Travellers. Joanna Corcoran made a presentation on BBR to this Committee recently but Martin is here today to talk specifically about how this type of social enterprise could be scaled and replicated.

Intro to TPI – and the need

As you may be aware Travellers are very over-represented in prison. This over-representation is not unique to Ireland; there is the same trend amongst Indigenous and minority ethnic groups in other countries. I would welcome an opportunity to speak to the Committee specifically on this issue at a future date.

One of the main questions I get asked by Travellers in prison is *'Can you help me to make a living to support my family when I come out of prison?' 'Will you help me get a job', 'Can I get help to get work?'* Unfortunately, there are many Travellers for whom work is not their priority, due to mental health, addiction, trauma, homelessness and other issues and I welcome the work of the *Task Force To Consider The Mental Health And Addiction Challenges Of Persons Interacting With The Criminal Justice System* on this issue, and we would welcome an opportunity to work with them).

In response to the requests from prisoners for help with employment, the TPI looked at positive action measures undertaken in other jurisdictions to address the issue.

We soon realised that while we are talking about this from the perspective of Travellers with a criminal conviction, our recommendations apply to all Travellers, and also to all under-represented groups.

What do we mean by positive action?

When we talk about positive action, we are talking about things that employers, including state agencies and government departments, can do to increase Travellers employment in their workplace.

We have identified what practical steps employers need to take:

Key success factors in planning and introducing positive action measures

- Leadership and senior management buy-in - 'senior champions'.
- An understanding of under-represented groups (cultural competency training)
- Zero tolerance of discrimination (derogatory language, stereotyping)
- Availability of staff and resources to support positive action initiatives.
- Removal of unnecessary entry requirements.¹
- A recruitment process that is simple and easy to navigate.
- Data and reporting – statistics on workplace diversity and progress towards targets.²
- Mentor support for recruits
- Support for promotion and progression.
- For internships, opportunities for permanent positions.
- Partnership between public sector agencies, minority group representative organisations and the private sector. Professional bodies can also play an important role.³

Also, we know that in other countries the use of internship programmes have shown success. We are aware that there are plans for a small internship programme for Travellers in the Dept of Justice (initiated as part of the current Programme for Government). But these need to be ramped up – it's not enough to have 4 or 5 places, and while we understand the need for pilots, we are also aware that there have been pilots 15 years ago (civil service internship programmes) which was evaluated, which had good practice and were never developed beyond their pilot phase. So we need to move on from pilots and to have this practice mainstreamed across government departments each year.

Martin pointed out in a recent radio interview that if there are 400,000 people working in the public sector, and if only 0.1% of these were Travellers, we would have 400 Travellers working in the public sector. It's hard to believe we haven't even achieved this paltry figure.

¹ Including criminal convictions as an automatic barrier to consideration. The UK's Prison & Probation Service 'Workforce Strategy 2020-2023', includes a commitment to recruit those with criminal convictions. Advertisements for certain roles in the UK's probation service state that the service is 'actively seeking those with a criminal record who have experience of the probation and/or youth justice service.' Candidates are not asked to declare spent or unspent convictions at application stage. Instead, when a successful candidate reaches the vetting stage, any unspent convictions are considered as part of a specially designed risk assessment. Therefore, having a criminal conviction will not – of itself – be a barrier to recruitment. See section 3.1 of the 'Working it Out' report

² The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) collects and monitors staff diversity data in order to check how representative the ministry is and to examine the success and impact of employment policies and practices. This includes identifying areas where policies and practices appear to be impacting disproportionately on certain groups of staff. Collecting, monitoring and publishing diversity data also supports its ability to show 'due regard' to the Public Sector Equality Duty, a legal requirement under the UK's Equality Act 2010.

³ The College of Policing and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in the UK have produced tools to support positive action.

What needs to happen?

- Government needs to make a commitment to having a public sector which is representative of its population.
- We need to have a formal positive action programme for recruiting Travellers to the public sector.
- We need to have a government internship programme (similar to those in Australia), across all government departments and public bodies. These should follow the good practices identified in our research, and they should have lead to a job.
- There is a role for professional bodies here – for example, the Local Government Management Board could play a role in supporting local authorities to do this. We know that some local authorities have practice in this areas, but it is ad hoc. The government could launch an initiative targeting these and other sectors.
- These programmes need to be led (and funded) from central government. We believe that DPER should be the lead department as it fits within their remit in terms of public sector reform and indeed directly relates to one of the pillars in 'Our Public Service' policy.
- Any new public service recruitment campaign must include provision for targeting Travellers.
- Local and national Traveller organisations such as GTM have extensive technical expertise in this area. These need to be resourced to support government agencies to undertake these positive action initiatives. They are also well placed to support Travellers to take part in these programmes.
- It is very important that having a criminal conviction does not automatically exclude people from recruitment opportunities.

Other opportunities

We know that the public sector is only part of the solution. We must support Travellers access to the private sector, the social enterprise sector and self-employment. We welcome initiatives and strategies such as The Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service strategy, Working For Change. Our recommendations are:

- For Travellers in custody who are preparing for release, we need to do more so that they are job-ready on release. This includes widening access to Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (while in prison) and improving the training opportunities while in prison.
- While we are hopeful that the new *Pathways to Work* employment policy will include targeting for members of the Traveller community, we also need a comprehensive national Traveller employment action plan which will implement all of the above recommendations.
- As regards social enterprise, Bounce Back Recycling is an excellent model of good practice. We need to build on this model to support the development of social enterprises for Travellers.

To conclude, we need to be ambitious. We cannot be having these conversations again in another five years time. Now is the time to act. The solutions are there, and the benefits will be felt by this and future generations.

Travellers in Prison Initiative (TPI) and Galway Traveller Movement

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Positive action – key success factors

- Leadership and senior management buy-in - 'senior champions'.
- An understanding of under-represented groups (cultural competency training)
- Zero tolerance of discrimination (derogatory language, stereotyping); zero tolerance should be visible (e.g. posters, policies)

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