

## **Presentation to the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community**

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I wish to thank the Joint Committee for the invitation to Ibec to appear today on employment issues with respect to the Traveller Community. My name is Kara McGann and I am the Head of Social Policy with Ibec, Ireland's largest business representative and lobbying group and I am appearing today with my colleague Meadhbh Costello.

The significant employment gap between the Traveller Community and other groups within the population has been well documented, a gap that has persisted regardless of periods of economic prosperity or recession. Covid-19 and its impact on care, construction, and service occupations, where Census 2016 data suggests many Traveller men and women work, will compound this employment situation further.

The reasons for this employment gap are complex with multi-layered challenges contributing to the stark figures. Research suggests low levels of educational attainment, disincentives built into the social welfare system, inappropriate activation supports and discrimination while job seeking among these challenges. However, the barriers to work seem to have their roots in systemic societal prejudice and exclusion of generations of the Traveller Community which have resulted in low confidence for action and support in achieving employment goals.

As such, a structured 'whole of society approach' with tailored interventions will be required to address the multi-faceted issues and repair the damage done with collaboration from all stakeholders, including business. While my submission to the Committee has greater detail, I will touch on some key areas that Ibec believe are impacting the situation and where there is scope for change.

### **1. Invisible in labour market policy**

Firstly, Travellers have often been omitted from Government activation or employment strategies like the last *Pathways to Work 2016-2020* strategy, or if featured, the strategy lacks detailed targets, timelines and owners to ensure they are achieved, resulting in the Traveller Community often being invisible in labour market policy.

In the wake of Covid-19 and as labour market activation measures are engaged to support people back into employment, it is essential that the Traveller Community is named in these activation and employment strategies to ensure they do not fall further from the labour market in the recovery.

Given the significant levels of Traveller unemployment, as well as including Travellers in such policies, further targeted supports may be required. It is essential that Intreo address these needs and that there are specific actions and approaches to increasing Traveller engagement. Using the adage "nothing about us without us" it would be important too that these supports are properly researched and funded and developed in collaboration with Traveller organisations.

## **2. Education and training**

Secondly, in general the Traveller Community have lower levels of education than the population at large which can hamper access to employment. As such a fully integrated approach to education and training, apprenticeships and pathways to employment, needs to be formulated in line with various Government strategies. Removal of the challenges within education for members of the Traveller Community would also be key as many report instances of discrimination or harassment or having to hide their identity for fear of same.

Employer involvement in the content of 'work ready' programmes offered by Traveller and partnership organisations could also support the development of in-demand skills and ensure that participants are kept as engaged with the labour market as possible through work experience and placement opportunities.

The Traveller Graduate network currently being created by Travellers for Travellers has the potential to provide peer support and both role models and mentors for young travellers coming through second- and third level education and making the transition into employment. This needs to be supported by government and employers to ensure its success.

## **3. Trust and identity**

The experience and perception of prejudice and discrimination towards Travellers in education, training and employment is a significant barrier which will require intensive work to mend relationships, address stereotypes, and debunk these beliefs if real participation is to be achieved.

We have seen the impact that the use of personal stories can have with other marginalised groups in breaking down assumptions and stereotypes and cultivating empathy and compassion. Therefore, opportunities to portray Travellers, their cultural heritage, and the roles they play in Irish society, including in the workplace, should be taken to change the narrative and address unconscious bias and prejudice. This could be included in the media, teacher training and the education curriculum in schools, as well as part of diversity and awareness training in organisations.

Tackling discrimination towards Travellers in the workplace should be supported by a wider public-awareness and anti-racism campaign which specifically addresses anti-Traveller racism. This would be particularly valuable to address racism against employees in public-facing occupations and the creation of workplaces where a person can feel safe and respected in bringing their whole self to work. Such a campaign should be considered as part of Ireland's upcoming National Action Plan Against Racism.

## **4. Employment**

Finally, for many employers the Traveller Community is an unknown entity and as such may result in a failure to encourage participation. An awareness campaign to educate employers and showcase some of the successful case studies around the country in social work, recycling, caring and landscaping to name but a few initiatives, may help to influence employers to actively engage with this often talented and skilled untapped pool of labour. The work done in 2006 with the *Integrated Workplace* initiative co-ordinated by the Equality Authority and supported by trade unions and

employers could be revisited to encourage the valuing of all cultures and ethnicities and the creation of truly integrated workplaces.

A successful initiative underway to support people with disabilities into work and provide an employer disability information service called Employers for Change is currently being run by *Open Doors*. This initiative offers employers information, advice and support, to enable them to confidently recruit and retain people with disabilities. A similar model could be undertaken for the Traveller Community and employers.

Opportunities for work experience or internship programmes should also be considered, possibly through the *Open Doors* initiative or a bespoke collaboration between employers and Traveller organisations. This would equip Travellers with the necessary experience that is sometimes lacking, offer mentoring, build their networks and smooth their transition into the workplace. This would require commitment and cooperation of a cross-section of leaders including members of both the Traveller and settled community; Government; Traveller groups and employers.

### **Conclusion**

To be fully inclusive as a country, we need to ensure that Traveller men and women are provided with the necessary supports, resources and services to enable them to fully realise their potential as active members of the Irish population.

As other commentators recently said there have been quite a number of reports about the Traveller Community over the years and now it really is time for concerted action. We have work to do to restore trust and belief within the Traveller Community to expect success in education and employment, and work to do to ensure that we tackle racism and discrimination within those experiences that are hindering engagement. To change the embedded and systemic issues will require a 'whole of society' approach involving all stakeholders, and when successful will impact positively on individuals, organisations and Irish society.

I will conclude by thanking members of the Joint Committee for the opportunity to present Ibec's views on this issue.

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