

## Meeting of the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community

18 April 2024 | Opening statement of Emma Ward

Hello everyone, thank you for having me here today to speak about my experiences of being a disabled Irish Traveller. I would like to start off with saying that while I speak about my own experiences; I am only one person of the intersectionality between the Irish Traveller and Disabled people communities, and there is a lot more issues that disabled people within that intersectionality face which needs to be spoken about. Therefore, I have come today to speak on two issues that are very important to me.

One of the biggest issues that I feel needs to be addressed and needs to be resolved urgently is the fact that there is not a lot of people with disabilities at the table where the decisions are being made, and their voice needs to be heard too because how are we meant to make Ireland more inclusive for everyone if we do not include that voice which is always forgotten about. Thankfully since October 2023, I have become a board member of the Mincéirs Whiden organization which means that I can bring my voice and unique view to their discussions and help make sure that when they are making the important decisions that disabled people are included. However, apart from that organization, as far as I know, I am the only wheelchair user at these discussions at any level and that is not right. There are so many different types of voices within the intersectionality that deserve to be heard and have equal representation. We need to have all those voices and views in mind at the big table to ensure that Irish society is inclusive for all Irish Travellers whether they have a disability or not.

The next issue I would like to discuss is the ongoing issue with the Personal Assistant scheme which is quite problematic because currently in Ireland PAs are not seen as a basic human right or as an essential support to people with disabilities. Although they most certainly are. PAs provide so many different kinds of support that make it possible for service users to live a better quality of life. In my case I have my PA for social outings like today because I love my independence and she helps me achieve it. With her support, I can pursue my activism, education, and run errands in town; all of which wouldn't be possible without me having a PA. However, one of the major issues is with the lack of funding from the Irish government in which the Personal Assistant scheme workers are fighting to restore the link between the HSE workers and the HSE funded organizations.

Due to these unresolved issues, there is always uncertainty when it comes to me planning trips because I know that at any time my PA could potentially not be able to assist me due to the PA shortages caused by lack of funding. This causes a lot of worry for me because I don't want to lose my independence my PA helps me achieve, which I fought so hard to gain. It's not just me who faces this worry either, it's the thousands of people with disabilities who rely on those services, so much more than me. It will be them that are negatively impacted by any disruptions. The government needs to make having a Personal Assistant a basic human right, so people with disabilities will not be stranded without that essential support and instead will be able to live more independent and fulfilled lives with the invaluable support the PA provides.

Please help make that important change that is needed

Thank you for listening and for having me here today.