

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

18 April 2024 | Opening statement of Chris McDonagh / Frank Kavanagh

Thanks, Chris, for introducing me. I'm Frank Kavanagh, the Deputy Manager of the Traveller Mediation Service (TMS) since January of this year.

Since 2017, I've been working as a Mediator and Trainer with TMS, an organisation dedicated to mediating conflicts between Travellers, between Travellers & Agencies, and between Travellers and the Settled Community.

TMS, based in Athlone, is funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth and supported by Restorative Justice in the Community. Our team of four full-time and three part-time staff members, along with a panel of skilled Traveller mediators, work to uphold the values of justice, equality, and peace.

Our mission at TMS is twofold: intervention and prevention. In our work, we help settle arguments all across Ireland. Whether it's fights among Travellers or problems with outside groups, we're here to talk things out and find solutions. And lately, we've been helping out in Northern Ireland too, bringing together families and communities who are split apart by disagreements.

But we don't just solve conflicts. We also focus on stopping them before they happen. TMS leads out on training programmes to empower Travellers to resolve issues in their communities. These efforts have had great success, with trained mediators preventing conflicts from getting worse. At TMS, we focus on settling disagreements calmly and well.

Our clients and partners include the Garda, housing bodies and educational institutions to name a few. But no matter who they are, our aim is always the same: to stop, handle, and change conflicts in ways that bring peace and mutual understanding.

We deal with all kinds of situations, from small arguments to big disputes involving many people. Our team will work, whether it takes a day or a longer process that could take months or even years.

One challenge we deal with is violence during arguments, especially when lots of people are involved. Sometimes, it takes us a long time to help settle things peacefully. For example, we once worked on a case for 14 months because it was really complicated and there was a lot of violence going on.

When you're dealing with conflicts among Traveller families, it's crucial to grasp what's really going on. Even small issues can blow up fast, bringing in more families and sparking dangerous disputes. That's when we use shuttle mediation, where we talk to each group separately to ease tension and encourage positive conversations.

Our goal is to believe that talking things through can solve a problem. We aim to make communities safer and happier by encouraging peaceful resolutions to conflicts and making people feel more connected.

One of our main projects is the accredited Traveller Conflict and Mediation Training Programme. It was developed in partnership with the Kennedy Institute at Maynooth University and the Kildare Wicklow Education and Training Board. This programme piloted in 2016 to 2017 taught mediation and conflict resolution to Travellers in a way that respects their culture. Since then, we've run this programme many times. Now, many Traveller men and women who completed this training are qualified mediators. They deliver conflict resolution in different community projects, youth programmes, and even prisons.

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Since 2016, we've been organising dialogue days between the Garda and Traveller communities. These gatherings give people a chance to talk openly and honestly, sharing their experiences and viewpoints. They've helped both groups understand each other better, making their relationship friendlier and more cooperative.

Also, we're now working with the Police Service in Northern Ireland (PSNI). We're holding workshops and training sessions to improve the connections between Travellers and the police. Our goal is to build better relationships between communities and the police, so we can all work together more effectively.

Through our training programmes and dialogue days, TMS is committed to bringing people together, building bridges, breaking down barriers, and creating a more inclusive society.

The journey of the Traveller Mediation Service (TMS) has always been about growing and finding new ways to bring peace and solve conflicts. One way we do this is through our Peer-Mediation Training in prisons.

In early 2017, following discussions with Castlerea prison staff, representatives from the Travellers in Prison Initiative (TPI) and the Red Cross prison group, we worked on a pilot Peer-Mediation Programme. This programme aimed to equip prisoners with the skills necessary to manage conflicts effectively within the prison environment.

As part of this, prisoners who completed the Peer-Mediation Programme parts 1 and 2 were offered an opportunity to join the MII Accredited Mediation Training Programme in partnership with Maynooth University. This was a huge success because eight prisoners and two teachers from Castlerea Prison became the first qualified mediators in Ireland through this programme. Among them, four were Travellers.

Following on from this, TMS has since extended the programme to Cork and Portlaoise prisons. More prisoners and teachers received MII Accredited Mediation Training after finishing the Peer-Mediation Programme. Now, three teachers and 17 inmates from these prisons are certified mediators. They're ready to help solve conflicts inside and outside the prison.

However, we don't just focus on solving conflicts in prisons. We also offer Conflict Management Skills Training Programmes for Traveller projects. These programmes help people understand conflict better, deal with their own reactions, and learn how to calm things down when tensions rise.

In 2022, TMS started a programme called the Young Peoples' Conflict Skills Programme. It is designed to help young Travellers learn how to handle conflicts better. This programme is important because most Travellers are under the age of 25, and it gives them the tools they need to prevent and deal with conflicts.

As we plan forward, TMS remains committed to breaking down barriers, promoting understanding, and encouraging peace and understanding. By giving people and communities the tools to solve conflicts peacefully, we want to create a more peaceful and inclusive society for everyone.

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Recognising how conflicts can affect the generations to come, TMS has grown its team to include trained staff dedicated to running a programme called Young Person's Conflict Skills. This programme helps young people learn how to handle conflicts better in their lives, aiming to stop conflicts from repeating and instead promote understanding and kindness.

Thinking about Frank and Chris's story, let's work to bring our communities together. Let's aim for a future where we solve conflicts peacefully and strengthen our bonds with family and community.

Thank you!