

Meeting of the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community 18 April 2024 | Opening statement of James Stokes

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude for the opportunity to speak here in the Seanad today.

“90% of Travellers say mental health problems were common in their community.
11% of Travellers will die by suicide. This is over seven times higher than the general population
82% of Travellers have been affected by suicide
44% of those affected were in their immediate family or their wider family.
36% of Irish people would avoid Travellers; 97% would not accept Travellers as members of their family; 80% would not accept a Traveller as a friend; and 44% would not want Travellers to be members of their community.

Successive governments have failed to address the conditions that Travellers live in. This is not political spin, or political talking points, this is the modern day reality.

So let me tell my story, My name is James Stokes, I'm an 18 year old Irish traveller from Newbridge County Kildare, I went to primary school in Scoil Mhuire in, Secondary school in St Conleth's Community college, I sat my leaving cert just last June and I'm now in Maynooth university studying to become a primary school teacher, my grandad was a local businessman before he passed away, owning his own Furniture shop in the town, my uncle now runs the business and they sponsor a local football team, we are apart of our local community, yet, racism is still evident, I've done what society has asked me to do? I work as an education support peer worker, yet once again, the racism is still there? There must be change because waiting around for the next traveller to take their life is simply not good enough. although I'm young, I'm fed up at the lack of political will in relation to Irish Travellers.

This government and previous governments have left us behind, but they must do more now! A national traveller mental health strategy must be implemented now.

as I said I'm not just an Irish traveller, I'm a young person, I work a part time job and I'm in education, yet housing is not an option for my near future, housing is not an option for any of my friends, rents are crazy high and the chance to buy your own home is a mirage.

To add to that, everybody on the island of Ireland is being affected by the cost of living crisis, the government must address that, but to be honest there are so many issues that affect everyone, including travellers, that must be addressed but we can start by better forward planning, by allocating necessary funds for travellers instead of continuously cutting funding, we need better forward planning in relation to population growth in communities, in Newbridge for example we need additional school places and GP services and across kildare more traveller specific accommodation.

I want the Ireland that I live in, the Ireland that my children will live in, to be a united Ireland, with a functional government capable of addressing the pressing issues of today, such as the traveller mental health crisis, travellers rights as a whole, climate change, housing, enhanced human rights protections, improved workers' rights, and education.

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I stand here as a proud Irish traveller that truly believes that Irish unity offers us the opportunity for a fresh start, a chance for everyone on this island to address the most critical challenges together, with unity of purpose. So the Irish government should establish a citizens assembly on Irish unity, as soon as possible to plan for a future where we are all equal, a future where racism against Irish travellers is a thing of the past and not something that is widely accepted.

Go raibh míle maith agat.