DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM SHAINCHEISTEANNA RÍTHÁBHACHTACHA A THÉANN I GCION AR AN LUCHT SIÚIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

Déardaoin, 20 Samhain 2025

Thursday, 20 November 2025

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	**Seanadóirí / Senators**
John Connolly,	Maria Byrne,
Dessie Ellis,	Malcolm Noonan,
Séamus McGrath,	Joe O'Reilly,
Naoise Ó Muirí,	Anne Rabbitte.
Maurice Quinlivan,	
Pádraig Rice.	

Teachta / Deputy George Lawlor sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session at 12.30 p.m., suspended at 12.48 p.m. and resumed in public session at 12.50 p.m.

Traveller Employment Programme: Business in the Community Ireland

An Cathaoirleach: Apologies have been received from Deputy Tony McCormack. The witnesses are all very welcome. I do not think anybody is watching remotely. I remind all those in attendance to ensure that their mobile phones are on silent mode or switched off.

As we are within the precincts of Leinster House, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentations they make to the committee. This means they have an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything said at the meeting. However, they are expected not to abuse this privilege and it is my duty as Cathaoirleach to ensure it is not abused. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

Members are also reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or entity outside of the Houses, or an official of the Houses, either by name or in such a way that makes him or her identifiable.

The agenda for today's meeting of the committee is an engagement with Business in the Community Ireland to discuss Traveller employment programmes. Our witnesses are Ms Linda O'Sullivan, head of social inclusion, and Ms Lyndsey O'Neill, Traveller employment programme co-ordinator. I now invite Ms O'Neill to make her opening statement. We will then proceed with a question and answer session.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: Business in the Community Ireland thanks the Chair and the members of the committee for the opportunity to present to the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community. Linda O'Sullivan and I will represent the organisation today. Our colleague Annmarie McDonnell, unfortunately, sends her apologies. She has been called away due to a family emergency.

For 25 years, Business in the Community Ireland has been a leader in sustainability and social inclusion, putting all pillars of environmental, social and governance firmly on the business agenda. Our mission is to inspire, challenge and facilitate businesses to bring about a sustainable, low-carbon economy and more inclusive society where everyone thrives. Alongside working with businesses on all aspects of their sustainability or responsible business strategies, we have been designing and delivering high-impact programmes tackling social inclusion and disadvantage for over two decades. Our social inclusion programmes connect companies with schools, jobseekers and underserved communities to create real, measurable change, helping young people to access opportunity and reach their potential and supporting jobseekers to gain meaningful work.

The jobseekers we work with include migrants, particularly those who have come through or are in the IPAS system, people with disabilities or long-term health conditions, women who have been distanced from the workforce and, of most relevance for this committee, jobseekers from the Traveller community. Each of our programmes has been designed to try to address disproportionate unemployment and I am sure members are all too aware of the unemployment and discrimination experienced by the Traveller community. Our motivation to develop a

specific employment support programme for this community was based on the unemployment rate for Travellers being at 61%, compared with 3.4% for the general population; the fact that 70% of Travellers have experienced discrimination when job seeking; and a recognition that the desire to work and progress within the Traveller community is there, with 66% completing a training course but only 30% progressing to employment.

Employment and unemployment are strongly linked with social determinants of health and self-worth. In 2022, we were fortunate to receive philanthropic funding from Community Foundation Ireland to pilot a programme for three years. We successfully completed this pilot and this year received further philanthropic funding from Rethink Ireland and once again from Community Foundation Ireland to build on the momentum of the pilot. The Traveller employment programme supports members of the Irish Traveller community to gain and sustain meaningful employment. We offer a flexible and supportive approach, shaped by the goals and circumstances of individual jobseekers. The programme provides one-to-one, person-centred career guidance and aims to support the great work being done by local and national Traveller organisations. We approached the project with a tried and tested model of service provision and learned quickly that we had to adapt and innovate to meet the unique needs of the community. We provide a culturally sensitive approach to career guidance, we spend time building trust with local Traveller organisations and we hold client meetings in the community instead of our office. We have removed paper and forms from meetings to create a safe environment and we focus more on one-to-one engagement than groups.

We currently work with over 20 referral organisations. Referral partners include national Traveller organisations as well as mainstream services, including prisons, addiction services, homelessness services, and mental health and youth services. Our programme targets those with intersectional needs. Building links with local organisations has been a core part of our work so far and collaboration with referral partners has been a key part of the programme. Being a Traveller-specific service within a mainstream organisation sets us apart and we feel it puts us in a unique position. The programme supports participants in all elements of their career journey, from skills identification to CVs and sustaining employment. A key focus has been on empowering individuals and groups within the community and creating links. Our team is small and this has allowed us to adapt and innovate based on the needs in different communities.

Since February 2022, we have engaged with over 100 Travellers and we have had 65 positive outcomes. As well as supporting individual jobseekers, an important aspect of our work is engaging businesses in the employment of members of the Traveller community. At Business in the Community, we have an inclusive workplace pledge called Elevate. Elevate was designed to hold employers accountable for claims they were making on inclusion. We currently have over 60 business signatories representing over 160,000 employees across Ireland. We officially launched the Traveller employment programme to this collection of employers during a 2022 flagship Elevate event. We also put a call out to business to take action on building trust with the Traveller community. We feel it is important to note that the building of trust is a two-way street.

Over the last few years, we have seen an increase in interest from the business community to support Traveller employment. The pace of engagement is often slow but it has allowed for business to develop inclusive workplaces, have robust policies around discrimination and a

consciousness of the unique challenges faced by the Traveller community. We recognise the strong template that has been developed by our members ESB and Irish Rail and feel that they have strong models in place. In conjunction with the Irish Traveller movement, we have developed employment-focused training for businesses looking to hire more individuals from the Traveller community. This two-hour session gives business representatives an insight into community and the challenges employees or jobseekers may face. It also gives guidance on recruitment and retention policies and opportunities for discussion. We warmly welcome the publication last week of the IHREC Traveller and Roma inclusive employment guide. This guide will be an excellent resource and give businesses a roadmap to support their inclusive employment journey.

In our experience, racism is the biggest challenge to gaining and sustaining employment. We commend businesses that are taking action to tackle misinformation about Travellers and racism within the workplace. These challenges are heightened for those who have left education early and without qualifications. We have a number of young jobseekers who are motivated and eager to work but are struggling to secure opportunities due to their age, a lack of qualifications or racism. The current business links we have are strong and we are in discussions with a number of business around how they can challenge discrimination, promote inclusive recruitment and target Travellers as part of their recruitment process.

I thank members for their time. We look forward to answering their questions.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Ms O'Neill. I now open the floor to questions. I call on Deputy Quinlivan.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I thank Ms O'Neill for her presentation. Will she give us some more information on what she describes as the strong models of the ESB and Irish Rail?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: The ESB, in its apprenticeship programme, has been working closely with the Irish Traveller Movement. We are very supportive of the work it is doing. We have not been involved in that. From my knowledge and speaking with the Irish Traveller Movement, the ESB developed promotional materials. Members of the Irish Traveller Movement were out with the company a few times gaining a better understanding of and encouraging and promoting policies to tackle any issues that came up, as well as creating avenues into the company for young Travellers. Irish Rail has created a secondary "in", as it were, into its apprenticeship programme. It has mainstream standard recruitment but has also put in place a process whereby somebody can apply to do work experience and progress into work placements, bypassing the general recruitment process which is hugely competitive. For some people, the chances of getting through that process are quite slim but this alternative avenue gives them a chance to go into the organisation to learn how it works, demonstrate their skill set, almost like a working interview, and then backfill into the apprenticeship programme.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Apart from the two companies she mentioned, does Ms O'Neill know of any other State, semi-State or State-supported businesses that are doing something similar?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: I do not. In terms of the apprenticeship piece, while I do not wish to speak on its behalf, I believe the Irish Traveller Movement is talking to some other companies. If there are any semi-State companies out there that want to get in touch with us, we would be happy to speak to them.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: In her opening statement, Ms O'Neill mentioned that since 2022, Business in the Community Ireland has engaged with over 100 Travellers and had 65 positive outcomes. What is a positive outcome? How is that defined?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We would define a positive outcome as somebody who progresses into employment. A positive outcome might also be somebody who is engaging in education, training or upskilling. As part of the one-to-one guidance process, we will sit with somebody to see where they want to go, what is their long-term goal in terms of employment and what steps do they need to go through to get there, be that doing a training course, going to college, doing the leave certificate or getting an industry-level qualification for a safe pass or a ticket. It is anything that someone can do that will increase their chances of gaining employment, and then the employment outcomes as well.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Looking at the figures, and I mean no disrespect to the witnesses, 100 interactions since 2022 seems quite low. Is there any way of upscaling that? Is there capacity to do that? What are the issues? Why has that not been upscaled?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: For the first three years, our team comprised of less than one whole-time equivalent. It was 0.8 WTE. The team consists of me, the co-ordinator and Ms McDonnell, who is our job coach from the Traveller community. That would probably be the limit of our capacity to provide one-to-one support.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: That is fair enough.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: With the additional funding we got this year, we have been able to hire an additional full-time job coach. We are hopeful that we will increase capacity with that.

Also, we targeted groups where there were intersectional needs and those who are further removed from the labour market, for instance, people who have come through the prison system or have unmet literacy needs, addiction issues or health issues. The challenges they faced were more significant.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: What are the existing barriers that prevent employers engaging with the programme?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: I suppose we do a lot of promotion work. We try to encourage members of Elevate Ireland to engage with the Traveller community and our programmes.

Things move quite slowly. When we meet a company, it is often with the diversity and inclusion team. These teams are very keen to engage with the programme and to recruit from the Traveller community but they will be conscious that they might have 2,000 or 3,000 staff. They will ask how they will get all of those staff on board with this process and how will they ensure they are creating a safe workplace for a member of the Traveller community coming in because the biggest issue we see is people facing racism, be that in the recruitment process or in employment. We have quite a number of people who have been in work and have faced racism in the workplace. We want to ensure, when we are working with a business, that we encourage it strongly to create a warm, welcoming and safe environment for anyone going into that workplace.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: In Ms O'Neill's experience, has she found there are more barriers to employment for members of the Traveller community than there are for the other marginalised people she deals with?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: Yes.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: She is 100% on that.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: Yes.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The figures are stark. Unemployment among the general population is 3.4% and for Travellers, it is 61%. It is 20 times higher.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: I started on the programme four years ago. I thought I was informed and had a good awareness of the racism faced by the Traveller community. The last four years have opened my eyes massively to the consistent racism being faced by people. I will phone an employer and be told there is a role and when I ask if I can send over a CV, I will be told "Yes". My email address is openly related to Traveller employment and when I send over the CV, the employer will say they are looking for somebody with more experience or they will keep me posted but they do not think it is the right fit. We want to ensure, when we are putting somebody forward, that we are putting them into a safe environment. It is important, therefore, that we are open and upfront with employers. That is definitely a "Yes".

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The committee will make recommendations on employment. Ms O'Neill's comments have to be included in that because they are damning. I thank her.

Deputy John Connolly: I welcome Ms O'Neill and Ms O'Sullivan. I will pick up on one of the last points Deputy Quinlivan raised around the unemployment level of 61% among members of the Traveller community. Do we have figures for the other minority communities in the workforce, for example, the migrant community and people with disabilities? Ms O'Neill said that comparison is poor, but do we have the data?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: I do not have it. Ms O'Sullivan might.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: There is some data out there. There is definitely a difference. People with disabilities would experience a higher level of unemployment and a lower level of labour force participation than people without a disability. There is evidence that there is significant under-employment among migrants, with many migrants in jobs that they are overqualified for. It is hard to get exact figures on those. We use the census and labour force survey data but they do not necessarily break the data down into those different communities.

Deputy John Connolly: I should have started with this question. I am afraid I am not familiar with Ms O'Sullivan's organisation. Is it fully State funded?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: No. We get some State funding for some of our programmes. The Traveller employment programme is not one of them currently. We have not got any State funding for the Traveller employment programme. We got philanthropic funding. As Ms O'Neill mentioned, we got funding for a three-year pilot which enabled us to have less than one full-time person work on the programme. It was something we were passionate about developing for a long time, purely because of the stark realities of the disproportionate unemployment rate and the challenges Travellers face.

We get some State funding. We run a number of other employment programmes. For disabilities, we would have funding through the Department of Social Protection and Pobal. We have a migrant programme and we got funding for it through the then Department of integration. That has now moved back to the Department of justice. There is some State funding there and we get funding through Tusla Education Support Service, TESS, for our education programmes. None of those funding allocations fully fund the work we do with the different groups in tackling disadvantage. We always try to leverage our Government funding through business or philanthropic funding.

Deputy John Connolly: On that point, does Ms O'Sullivan find businesses are happy to support her organisation?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: Yes.

Deputy John Connolly: That is good. Her organisation worked with the Traveller community before the pilot programme. Is that correct?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: We always worked with the Traveller community in our education programmes through the schools system.

Our programmes run in over 200 DEIS schools nationally. All of them are linked with a local business. We deliver a series of different types of programmes aimed at supporting children to enhance their access to opportunity and introduce the world of work. There is a high percentage or proportion of members of the Traveller community in a lot of those schools. We have done some work through that. We have had some experience with members of the Traveller community coming onto one or other of our employment programmes, but we did not have a specific programme until we got this funding. It was a cause for celebration because we had been looking for it for so long to try to add it to the programme.

Deputy John Connolly: Was there only funding for three years?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: Yes. We only got confirmation of this three-year cycle in the middle of this year.

Deputy John Connolly: Is Ms O'Sullivan confident the programme is going to continue for another three years?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: Absolutely.

Deputy John Connolly: Has there been any source of State funding, other than philanthropic? Has State funding been sought for this programme?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: We have applied for a couple of different things over the years but there has not been a specific channel for us to apply through. One of the goals we have set for this three-year iteration of the programme is that by the end of it we will have sustainable Government funding to allow us to work with the community. We can leverage the philanthropic and the business, which enables us to do some of the work with business to break down some of the challenges that are there. The cultural awareness piece is huge in trying to get into business and doing that. Ideally, we would use Government funding to work directly with individuals to support their job readiness.

Deputy John Connolly: Do the witnesses have any idea what Government Department or source they might looking to for that money?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We have not explored it. As Ms O'Sullivan said, the initial funding was through Community Foundation. Eighteen months before the three-year cycle for that funding finished, we were conscious that it was coming to an end and we were linking with Community Foundation on progression of that fund, and then linking in with Rethink. Our focus was probably more on the philanthropic side. If there are avenues with the new national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy, NTRIS, that is coming in, we will definitely explore them, but we are quite time-sensitive. We lack the time and resources to put a lot of effort into it because we are trying to do the business piece, the client piece and then the funding piece. The first six months of our year were very much focused on funding, which took away from the one-to-one client work and the business work.

Deputy John Connolly: Does any other agency do similar work with the Traveller community in terms of preparation for the employment sector?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: The special initiative for Travellers, which is run through the employability services, does something similar, as does the Irish Traveller Movement through the Traveller accommodation programme, TAP. A lot of the local area employment services support Travellers, but they are not-----

Deputy John Connolly: Traveller specific.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: Yes, that is it.

Deputy John Connolly: None of us has the authority to guarantee funding, but BITCI might keep us updated on its efforts.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: We have a programme running at the moment, which starts in the schools. We work with students with disabilities for two years in secondary school and when they leave school, they work with a job coach for the first year. That is a new programme for us. It is Pobal but we got funding through the Department of Social Protection. It is a workability scheme. From talking with colleagues, there is real scope to do something for the Traveller community in a similar model by starting the work and building that support network in the schools, but then having the pathway once people leave, so people are not leaving and coming out into nothing.

Deputy John Connolly: Ms O'Neill spoke about sending CVs and getting the kind of response that suggested employers were looking for someone with more experience. When BITCI successfully gets someone to the point of an interview, does it have the resources to help from that point?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: Yes. We do interview prep with people and, where possible, if we can advocate for them with an employer, we would as well. We have done that when they have gone for an interview with a company that is a member of Business in the Community. We have possibly got a HR contact and advocated on their behalf. For some people who are coming from backgrounds where employment is a bit more unstable, for example agency work, be it in either the warehousing or construction sectors, their experiences of racism can be even higher. It is then harder for people, when they are going in, to have references. We had one person with one reference, but the company was looking for two. We phoned the HR recruiter

and explained his circumstances, which were that he had been the victim of awful racism within the workplace. We explained his circumstances and how that had impacted on his job search and we were able to provide a reference on his behalf as well. He secured the role and did quite well there.

Deputy John Connolly: It is incredible to think that people suffer discrimination in their workplace in this day and age. I am assuming these are adult workplaces.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: Yes. This person mentioned that he was getting on very well in his workplace, but there is a constant flow of new staff members coming in and out with agency work within warehouses. A new flow of people came in and he said everything just shifted. He found it impossible to stay where he was. We were working with him and it is awful to have to coach somebody on how to deal with racism in the workplace, especially when he experienced it so often, but it is about what people can control within those circumstances. Can they go to their line manager? How do they progress it and how do they deal with the situation in a way that has the best outcome for them? If people are being racist towards you, and the racist language is quite aggressive, how do you not react to that? How do you take a step back and ensure that the outcome works in your favour?

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: My apologies for being late. I thank both witnesses for coming in. I have a few quick questions. The statistics in the report are pretty stark. Where do they come from? Is that BITCI research or is it sourced from elsewhere? Where are the 61% unemployment rate for Travellers and the discrimination statistics sourced from?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: They come from a range of sources. The 60% comes from the most recent census, in 2022. The experiences of racism came from the research Pavee Point recently undertook.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: The reason I ask is there is nothing on gender. What is the witnesses' sense of gender breakdown and work in what they have seen? Is there a gender issue in terms of whoever is getting an opportunity in trying to make progress on employment? Are Traveller women getting the same opportunities as Traveller men? I ask for a sense of that.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We probably have about 75% men within the programme. While there are intersectional challenges that I mentioned, these are different for women. The women currently on the programme are either quite young and have no care responsibilities, or they are older and have a bit more freedom. There is that cohort in the middle who, due to young children and caring, are not linking in with us. Our job coach, Ms Annmarie McDonnell, is from the Traveller community. She is doing a lot of work to try to link in with the local community, and meeting with women's and mothers' groups, to try to plant the seed around employment and encourage women to have a consciousness that it is an opportunity for them. We are doing what we can to increase the number of women participating in work.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It sounds like it is hard to get to that cohort of women who, as Ms O'Neill said, have care responsibilities and are at a certain stage where it is hard to get to them.

I have a second question on what Deputy Connolly raised. Who else is working and trying to make progress in this area? Who are BITCI's collaborators or who else is working with it?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: From a business side or from a-----

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Yes, from a business side.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We work quite closely with Mr. Price. They have done a lot of great work on recruitment and looking for people to go into the retail sector. We have several companies from our member network that we link with quite regularly. When it comes to employment, when we speak with them they might only have graduate opportunities, so we link them with the path 5 and graduate officers within the colleges. We recommend that they advertise their roles within that cohort if they want to increase the graduates, but the number of graduates coming from the Traveller community is so small. We then ask if they can influence their supply chain, engage with a schools programme or engage with young people. We ask them to do anything they can to promote the world of work and to show the Travelling community that they are an open employer, that they are diverse and that they welcome applications into their company from that community.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Taking Mr. Price as an example, what is it about Mr. Price that makes it work?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: They say "Yes". If I say I have this person who is looking to get into retail and they are living in this area, if there is an opportunity available, they will get the opportunity. They will get the start. They do outreach as well, so they are going into different communities and promoting themselves as an employer that is diverse and inclusive. That builds trust as well. It is a great encouragement, let us say for a young Traveller in Oberstown who is maybe coming to the end of their sentence and a recruiter goes in and says: "We welcome you, we would love to get an application from you and I would love to have you in the store." That can just provide a spark for somebody to give them the motivation and the momentum to go for something.

Something that they do as well is that they try things and if it does not work, they reassess it as to why it did not work and how can they improve on it and increase the chances of it working. We recommend that to every employer. If a company commits to engage with a Traveller employment programme, we ask it to try something but to commit to three, five or ten years so it can take time to try it, see what works and what does not work, and reassess the model and change it. Hopefully, companies will build momentum and trust and increase the number of people that are applying.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It sounds like there is something about Mr. Price's approach or its commitment that other retailers or sectors may not have. There is something in their approach that is working.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: They have the commitment and the desire to address inclusion within their workplace. They are probably one of a few employers who are actively availing of Government incentives as well such as the wage subsidy scheme and the work placement employment programme. They are bringing the commitment and absolute willingness to move people on and into employment. The business model allows that as well. That is an interesting one. The interest is there from employers but some of the research we have done suggests that large employers are not availing of any of the Government subsidy schemes to take people off the live register or off a benefit payment.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I have just one more question, Chair. Ms O'Sullivan mentioned the tranche of funding they got for the three-year project and that there was a renewal of it. Could she please give us a sense of the quantum of funding we are talking about?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: It is in and around €120,000 a year for three years.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Was that the original award?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: No, that is the current.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Roughly what was the original award?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: It was a bit less than that. It was €140,000 over three years.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: The programme is managing to get additional resourcing, albeit relatively small.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: We definitely got additional resourcing, which has enabled us to go from 0.8 of a full-time equivalent to 1.8 of a full-time equivalent for the next three years.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: I would like to add something in response to the Deputy's question on Mr. Price. Part of what they have done as well, because they have a larger number of Travellers in employment within the workforce, is they have created a safer space for people, so people go in there and they feel comfortable disclosing that they are going into a workplace and there is another Traveller in there. People do not have to hide their identity. There is no fear of feeling racism within the workplace and that is a big part of what companies need to do to be inclusive as well. They seem to be quite conscious of that as well.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the witnesses. That is interesting.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I apologise to the witnesses. I had a vote in the Seanad, along with the Leas-Chathaoirleach and Senator O'Reilly, so I apologise for not being here for the presentation.

I will build on some of the questions where we left off. We are talking about the three-year project. I was just doing the sums before I left. I thank the witnesses for answering the questions. It would have €360,000 over the three-year project from 2022, as it was €120,000 every year.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: No, it was €120,000 over the three years.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: A total of €120,000 over the three years.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: Yes.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Does the programme get funding from any other Department or anywhere else?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: No.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: So for the 65 people who go into employment, that converts to a cost of €1,800 per individual. Do the witnesses work with the local development organisations, LCDCs or LEADER groups across the country?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We are very much Dublin-based. We do get people phoning from across the country and we try to refer those people to local organisations where they can be supported. Within Dublin, we work with the local area partnerships and the local Traveller organisations such as in Clondalkin and Ballyfermot. We very much try to approach it in such a way that we are supporting the work that they are doing. We are not trying to take people away from them. As much as we can, we try to work collaboratively.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: The only reason I ask that question is that I am from a rural area. I am not from a large built-up area. I apologise, but I always focus on a line of questioning relating to rural areas. I totally appreciate what the witnesses are trying to achieve in built-up areas and the challenges in that regard.

Mr. Price's model seems to be a good one. When a person gets an opportunity within Mr. Price to participate and then to move on, is there a good retention rate?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: I can only speak for the people that we have placed with Mr. Price. The level of success has been reasonable. The approach did not work for two people, but they were very distanced from the labour market. The model did not work for that cohort so we are re-evaluating what we need to do to ensure they are more job-ready going into the workplace. For the others that went in, we had one person stay there for over six months and then he progressed into something else.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: For those based in Dublin, the ETB has a huge impact on what the witnesses are trying to achieve, either from school dropouts or those who are excluded from school, which is a part of it as well. I am focusing totally on Travellers, but they also have additional needs. They could be neurodiverse or whatever else. Does the ETB or the Youthreach model work with the witnesses?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We have not linked that much with the Youthreach and ETB programmes. Originally, we were just for those over 18 and then in the middle of last year we found that we were getting more referrals from those who were under 18 so we got cleared to expand the service. We probably had up to five or seven people over the past year who are under the age of 18. One of those progressed into Youthreach. The experiences of the others in education seemed to be so negative that if you mention education it was just a hard "No".

They are almost too young to work - they are aged 15 or 16 - and they want to get into trades but do not have the qualifications. They cannot even get into entry-level roles like warehousing and construction. We were trying to arrange visits to sites and workplaces but they had to be over 18 to do those. Opportunities are limited for them. I would say there was some neurodiversity there as well for a couple of people within that group so I imagine school was not a friendly place for them. We are building a rapport with them, working with the Traveller organisations that are on the ground and have a stronger relationship with them, and suggesting things. We are looking for work for them but also asking them if they have thought about maybe going up to the equine centre in Cherry Orchard or other avenues that are not as definitively educational. They might not see them as educational avenues but they would learn a lot by going through them, if that makes sense.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Absolutely. I am actually just after coming back in from Clondalkin where the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, was also. The first ever all-accessible cycling park was opened, believe it or not, in Clondalkin. There was great collaboration in the

community between the ETBs, South Dublin County Council and various other organisations. There is a great community there and I have no doubt the Cherry Orchard Equine Centre Ms O'Neill spoke about is always looking for volunteers.

Ms O'Neill is here today to try to let us understand the challenges, because the challenges are great and varied. We are trying to peel it back as to how we can assist. Are literacy and numeracy some of the barriers? I am trying to understand what the barriers are when Ms O'Neill meets with these young people. They might not have had a great experience in education but that could apply to any sector. When Ms O'Neill is meeting 15- and 16-year-olds and trying to introduce them or get them started, are the very basic foundations of literacy and numeracy there?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: For the most part, yes. The basic reading and writing skills are there for the younger cohort. For those who are older, we would see more unmet literacy needs. We work quite a bit with Oberstown and we find that the young people coming from there have more challenges around literacy issues.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I thank our guests and welcome them, and well done on what they do; it is wonderful work. What kind of policy changes do they think would be most effective in integrating Travellers into the workplace? What specifics? We were talking as a committee about what we could do about things. Will the witnesses give specific changes that we could chase up with the Government or whoever? What would the witnesses say, if they had a list? I will start with that question.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: It would be quite challenging for me to say policy-wise because we very much focus on the one-to-one work and the work with businesses. My awareness around the policy piece is not that strong. Would Ms O'Sullivan like to answer?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: Something that could be interesting to explore is how there are a lot of employers who are very committed to inclusion but there is often a gap between that statement of commitment and the actual reality. That is what Ms O'Neill alluded to. We started an inclusive workplace pledge where if companies said they were inclusive, we encouraged them to prove it and look at the diversity profile of their workforces. We asked them to submit that data to us, which we then anonymised and aggregated. What we are asking them to do is build a workforce that is reflective of the diversity that is out there within society. We ask businesses to look back at their numbers. If they have 1,000 people, there should be four members of the Traveller community and 200 people with a disability.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Forgive my ignorance of this, as I should know it, but it is my understanding that there are no financial incentives at the moment for employers to employ Travellers.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: No.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That might be something that could be considered.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: We want a recognition that companies are building a diverse workforce - not just bringing them in, but progressing them through the ranks.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That could get companies other grant aid.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: I think a recognition of that would be very welcome.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: It maybe could be linked to grants or something.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: Or it could be procurement.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That is something we can think about. I thank Ms O'Sullivan. How do pledges like Elevate effectively hold employers accountable? How does Elevate work in practice?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: Every company that signs up to it commits to conducting a diversity profile of its own workforce.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Is it a voluntary commitment?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: Yes, and we ask the company to submit that diversity profile to us and we aggregate it. At the moment, we have a dataset for a collective Elevate workforce of over 160,000 people. We ask about all indicators of diversity, from ethnicity and disability to age, gender and so on. Companies cannot necessarily gather all of that data because they have to rely on voluntary disclosure but we are encouraging them to put in place programmes and initiatives within their own workplaces.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That is great. What does a culturally sensitive career guidance course really mean? How is it implemented? I presume Business in the Community Ireland goes in and does it with the Travellers specifically?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: When we started, we used a model we had for a programme called "Ready for Work", which had worked with people coming from addiction and homelessness. We thought that was a good fit. As part of that, anyone who was interested in the programme came in and we met them, filled in a form and registered them. However, it did not work because people were not that keen to travel in to where we were. Being culturally sensitive, we travelled to them.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That worked better.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: That worked. In regard to paperwork, we found with people that when we took out a form to get their details, they were gone. We do not use forms anymore. We sit and have an informal conversation and try to draw out the information we need. As I mentioned before, the local Traveller organisations are a huge asset for us. Working within the community, they have the trust. We very much go in and support the work they are doing. We provide jobseeking support to people, if they identify that need.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Business in the Community Ireland says it is very Dublin-centric or Dublin-based at the moment. I presume it would wish that to be otherwise. Is there a strategy to widen out to the country?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We do not have a strategy at the moment. The funding was very much up in the air for much of 2025 so we were focused on just securing the funding for Dublin to keep the show on the road.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Yes. The greater need is in Dublin, but the programme needs to be widened out, if Business in the Community Ireland could.

I know time is tight, so this is my final question. There were 65 positive outcomes. That is the great news and transformative for those 65 people, their extended families, and probably for children and generations to come. That is big in itself. One is big; 65 is better. Then there were 35 failures, based on the figure of 100. Will Ms O'Neill give any sense of why those 65 people succeeded and what the learnings are from them? How are they getting on since?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: For the other 35, we would not say they were failures.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I know.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: A cohort of those might have progressed on to a CE scheme, so they are in CE or training at the moment. Maybe there has been a family issue, so they have taken a step back. We remain engaged with them and the door is always open for when the person is job ready. The timing needs to be right for people.

What has worked well for the others, I think-----

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I am very interested in the anatomy of the 65 and what happened there.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: As for what happened, I suppose somebody was motivated, they were eager, the timing was right for them. Things aligned. Maybe they went into the local Traveller organisation. We were able to get out and meet with them and ask them what they needed. We were very lucky that we received another pot of philanthropic funding that supported education and employment resources.

If somebody needs a safe pass, they do not have apply through the local employment service for training support grant, TSG, funding. We can ring up, arrange it and get it paid for quite quickly. If somebody needs interview clothes, we can make funding available for someone to get a pair of trousers or a shirt in order that they are job-ready a bit quicker.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Where are the 65 now? Has Ms O'Neill been able to monitor any of them since?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: Yes. The majority who have progressed into employment have retained the employment, which is very positive. For those who have completed training, we are still linking in with them about what the next step is. We are putting in applications, checking in with them regularly and trying to promote their progression.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I apologise for being late; I had Seanad business as well. Stop me if I ask questions that have been previously covered. I am interested in following up on the Mr. Price experience. A way of trying to promote this among industry and business retailers generally would be useful. It is clear in so many reports that diversity is good for a workplace and fosters greater inclusion and integration in the wider community. Is it something that could be built on in terms of the Mr. Price experience, for example? It could mentor and support other businesses to do likewise and build a momentum. We have had Mr. Price mentioned here on a number of occasions with regard to what a good employer it is in terms of diversity in the workforce. It is about trying to build on that experience to allay fears in other sectors or to give other prospective employers the confidence to move forward and to embrace diversity rather than to say that they have a diversity policy.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: If I were to call out one person, it would be Edel McSorley from Mr. Price. Regarding speaking and encouraging, she is very much out there in sharing the model that they would use and the approach Mr. Price uses. She is very engaged on engaging with other businesses and speaking to them. That model works well for Mr. Price, but it might not work for other industries. A lot of the work we do is quite bespoke with companies. Each individual company has its own approach to it. When we meet with them and are sitting with them, the will is there, but it is about how they transfer that will into the recruitment of an individual. What steps do they need to take to ensure the workplace is engaged and welcoming for this individual? What are the recruitment practices? Are they targeting members of the Traveller community? What other promotional activities can they do? Similar to ESB creating the video, little things like that build the connection. It is often different from industry to industry or business to business. It is quite diverse.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Is some of that work with the prospective employee on mentoring, confidence building and that type of wraparound support for the employee to ensure they have the confidence to stay the course?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We also provide in-employment support. Once somebody gets into the workplace, we check in to see how it is going and if they are getting on well or if they have any issues. If there are any issues, we try to tackle them before they become too big or insurmountable.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: In Ms O'Neill's experience, does she find there are cases where Travellers are hiding their identify when they are going for jobs? Is it commonplace that they are hiding their identity in putting themselves forward for employment?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: Yes, it is. However, any business I have met has been quite happy to share its experience with other businesses. Irish Rail has met with a couple of other employers and shared experiences of its apprenticeship programme. We met with a construction company recently and we were speaking about this. They said: "It would be great if we could get other construction companies. We would happily work together." There is an openness within the business environment to work collaboratively to tackle the issue and share resources and information. It is not something I have seen before in this kind of sector, but there has been a massive shift in past four years. When we launched Elevate in 2022, nobody was talking about Traveller employment. Now, there is a much more of a consciousness and openness to it. Employers are much more willing to engage. There was the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, report last week. ESB was there on a panel. AXA and Mr. Price were in the audience. St. Stephen's Green Trust had a similar event five years ago. Employers were reluctant to be seen as being involved with Traveller employment. There has been a shift within the business environment.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: We have a dichotomy of persistently high unemployment among the Traveller community. With a country in full employment, that is a labour force that is needed. Has that been a contributing factor?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: Can the Senator repeat his question?

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Is the change that Ms O'Neill has seen because we are a country in full employment? Part of it is based on trying to achieve tangible greater diversity, but also it is because there is persistently a challenge in filling posts.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: It is probably a mix. I hope it is more that people are seeing the value of diversity. There is more investment in inclusion. There are more diversity, equality and inclusion officers working within companies. It is being seen as an area where companies need to invest the manpower to create more inclusive and representative workforces.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: On the three Dublin local authorities, how much engagement is there? There is an increasing need for a diverse workforce in our local authorities, outdoor staff, park staff, etc. Have there been opportunities there for potential employment?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We have not linked with the local authorities. It is possibly because we would not have anyone on our caseload who is looking to get into that kind of work. It is not that we have reached out and not heard back; it is just the opportunities have not come up.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Is it something that might be considered, particularly with park staff and a lot of the work that is going on in urban development?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: Definitely. A lot of young people and not so young people are looking to get into that manual and hands-on kind of work. Ballyfermot Training Centre was running a course in conjunction with the Dublin City Council where it was upskilling. It was a six-week training course and then progression into employment. Going back to the education question, if there is a tangible outcome at the end of it, one can tell people that it is just six weeks, the college staff are really nice and at the end of it there is an employment opportunity if it all goes well. There is much more incentive for somebody to engage with a programme where there is an earn and learn element.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I would imagine in the local authorities there are pathways into other opportunities. For example, a person could start out as general operative or working in the parks and move on to other areas of work. It is something that should be considered.

I thank Ms O'Neill for her engagement. She may have already addressed the question of apprenticeships. What is the level of uptake of apprenticeships among Traveller boys and girls? What types of apprenticeships would they typically be going for?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We have only had a small number of people who have come to us interested in apprenticeships. We generally refer them on to the Irish Traveller Movement, ITM, for its apprenticeship incentivisation scheme. We have had a few people who were interested in plumbing, roofing, tarmacking and electrical. Those would be the key ones. There are a small number. Where we can we use that collaborative approach, such as working with ITM, where the incentives are there for employers and the young person. If we can support people coming through the ITM programme, we would try to do that.

Senator Maria Byrne: I apologise for not being here earlier. I was in the Seanad and missed the opening statement, but I have read it.

I know the witnesses said they are, more or less, based in Dublin but would they be aware whether it is the same experience throughout other counties as well? That is my first question.

On education, the witnesses said they do not have many linkages with ETBI but with regard to encouraging Travellers into education, skills shortages or whatever, who do they engage or link with?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: With regard to people's experiences outside Dublin, we get calls from Travellers across the country who are looking for employment. Their experience is that their name is seen and that is the end of the conversation. It is often harder in more rural communities as well, where names would be better known. I am not from Dublin myself and I would know it coming from where I am from. It is definitely felt across the board. It could even be stronger in more rural areas where there is more consciousness of certain surnames.

On encouraging people into education, the Traveller-specific community employment, CE, programmes are often a good avenue for people. Blanchardstown has one and Exchange House has a local training initiative, LTI, and CE schemes. They are good starts for people. There is a lot of encouragement around trying to get Travellers into education but, going back to the culturally sensitive piece, it has to be the right environment for somebody. There are especially challenges that are maybe faced by young Traveller women going into a mainstream environment. They are on their own.

We ran a work placement programme last year for students in fifth year and it was opened up to members of the Traveller community. We had three young girls going into Davy for a week doing careers in finance. Davy was so flexible with it. It was originally meant to be for fourth years but we had two people doing the leaving certificate applied, LCA, one in fifth year and one in sixth year. We asked Davy if it minded if they went in and we were told yes, no problem. One of the girls, for cultural reasons, was not allowed to travel on her own and we asked if her friend could go with her. Her friend is from the settled community. We were told yes, that is no problem, and to let her on in as well. The three girls ended up doing it. Little adaptations like that made it accessible for those girls to go through.

Senator Maria Byrne: Great. I thank Ms O'Neill.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: Our Traveller employment programme is based in Dublin but Business in the Community Ireland is a national organisation. Through our schools programme, we are operating all over the country in the DEIS school network. Quite a number of schools have large numbers from the Traveller community attending. We work in conjunction with the schools completion programme to try to keep people in school to leaving certificate and come out with a qualification. We have some really nice examples from that area of work. TELUS Digital in Mayo did a specific piece around engaging with its local school and the Traveller community particularly, bringing the children and parents to an informal "here are what career opportunities exist" event. There are examples of that throughout the country but the detailed work with jobseekers is focused in Dublin.

Senator Maria Byrne: That is perfect. I thank Ms O'Sullivan. On the anti-discrimination policy, the witnesses were talking about some of the employers and highlighted one or two companies they work closely with. Is it easier to get smaller or larger companies to engage? Is it easier to get them to give employment, say, to Travellers or to give Travellers a chance?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: I would say our progressions have been split between large companies we engage with as part of the Business in the Community Ireland network and somebody pushing in a CV and getting on well. There are definite pros and cons to both.

Senator Maria Byrne: If I was to say to Ms O'Neill in the morning that she could choose a policy change to address the whole discrimination issue, what would her first thought be?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: I do not know if it is a policy change but more accountability would be welcome. If somebody does something that is a racist - that passive, everyday racism and the banter - it can have a hugely detrimental impact on those who experience it, so it would be more accountability. I know we speak a lot about being the conscientious bystander. Ms McDonnell has asked this of colleagues. She gave a session to all of our colleagues in Business in the Community Ireland and they asked her what they could do to be more supportive of the Traveller community. She said that if somebody says something that has racist undertones or is outwardly racist towards the Traveller community, we should call it out. In regard to a specific policy, I could not say.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: Overall, it is that anti-racism piece, zero tolerance for racism and whatever can be done on that. That goes across the board. We can see it in the divisions and how it is impacting social cohesion at the moment. We need zero tolerance for that, any supports that can be put in place and a recognition for employers who are doing well and doing the right thing.

Senator Maria Byrne: That leads me to my last question. Ms O'Sullivan touched on it there. The strategy that is most effective is engaging with the employer to get them to be fair to everyone in respect of anti-discrimination and equality across the board. What type of strategy works best?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: On the one hand, when we are working within Business in the Community Ireland on one side of the house, we are working with very large businesses. Most of them are very advanced in their thinking around diversity, equity and inclusion. When you are working them, they are bought into the agenda. They know the business case. It is then just making it alive on the ground and that is why we try to encourage them to hold themselves accountable, measure the diversity and see what is actually happening on the ground. I again refer to that zero tolerance. We need to cut out banterism and jokes and have active bystanders within the workplace. Not only would that be beneficial within the workplace but then all of those employees would be going out into their communities as ambassadors for inclusion. That is really important. When it comes to smaller companies, they do not necessarily have that stand-alone policy. They are just trying to get people in and there are different pressures on smaller companies.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the witnesses for being here today. I apologise; I was late as well. I unfortunately had another committee meeting on at the same time so I am trying to double-job.

By way of background, Ms O'Neill said in her opening statement that the organisation Business in the Community Ireland has been in place for approximately 25 years, promoting sustainability and social inclusion. What kind of a budget does it have and what are its main sources of funding?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: We operate annually with a budget of between €4 million and €5 million. On our sources of funding, about 48% comes through Government funding and the balance is through business funding, with a very small percentage of philanthropic funding, which largely covers our Traveller employment programme. We work with large employers and they join our network as members. They pay us a membership fee and in return for that, we work with them on their responsible business agenda. We deliver things like an inclusive

workplace pledge and an Accelerate pact for climate and nature. We run our education and employment programmes. We have a broad suite-----

Deputy Séamus McGrath: How many staff does Business in the Community Ireland have?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: This coming Monday, we will have 83 people. We have three new starters on Monday.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: That sounds quite high.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: They are not 80 full-time equivalents but probably about 61 full-time equivalents.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Okay. That sounds good. The Traveller employment programme is obviously a significant part of what the organisation does. It is very welcome. In her statement, Ms O'Neill mentioned that racism is the biggest challenge the organisation faces with regard to greater success with that programme. Will she comment on that? Is it an issue that is as bad as ever or worse, or are there any signs of improvement on that?

There is an immigration issue at the moment. Is that fuelling more racism? What are the witnesses picking up, anecdotally, on a day-to-day basis?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We are new to the area. I have been with the Traveller employment programme for four years. Anecdotally, what I hear within the local Traveller organisations and the national organisations is that it is just consistently bad.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: It is as bad as ever.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: Yes. There has been no shift either way. The business world seems to be more open and understanding that this is the next cohort and more needs to be done to be more inclusive around it. On a day-to-day basis, the experience for Travellers is consistently negative.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Yes, that is-----

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We have done a lot to try to get members of the Traveller community to speak to business and to inform it of how impactful this is and what it is doing to the Traveller community in terms of mental and physical health. Cathleen McDonagh Clark from Exchange House spoke at the Elevate event for us and referred to it as a shadow that followed you around all the time. Sometimes, I think the settled community is just blind to it. Until you have somebody like Bridget Kelly or Anne Marie O'Donnell standing up and speaking to people about what it does-----

Deputy Séamus McGrath: It is disheartening to hear that it is as bad as ever in the year 2025, almost into 2026. It is difficult to believe that there has not been some progress made in relation to the raw racism that is out there.

Specifically, there has been success with the programme. What particular business sectors would engage with it? What sectors are better than others in terms of engaging with the programme?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We have had quite a few from construction that were keen to get involved. Their recruitment is predominantly graduate, so it is about talking to them and trying

to access those supply chains and subcontractors. There are huge opportunities with apprenticeship-type programmes. That is a recent thing this year, so we would love to see it move further. We link with some logistics companies, facilities and a few of the semi-States as well.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: But not so much with the service industry, hospitality and retail.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: A few retailers, but not so much hospitality. We had one very negative experience trying to place somebody within the hospitality sector. We are client driven, so it is about what people come into us and ask for. Very few people would come in and say they want to work in that sector. In terms of experiences with racism, however bad it is in general society, it is like 21-times higher if the person moves into the hospitality sector.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Absolutely. Does employment in the public sector come under the programme?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: We have not placed anybody in the public sector.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Is that open to the programme?

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: Yes. Some of our other programmes actually have a high success rate in people securing employment in public jobs.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: But not the Traveller programme.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: It just has not happened to date.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: The State needs to lead by example. That is important.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: Absolutely.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I will leave Senator Rabbitte to flesh that out because I have less than a minute left and, unfortunately, I will need to go back to the Committee of Public Accounts. However, a 61% unemployment rate in the Traveller community versus 4% to 5% in the general population is quite staggering. In the 50 seconds left, what are the top three things that need to be done to shift the dial on that and to reduce that percentage? It is an open-ended question. I thank the witnesses for their engagement.

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: I would say that, of the 40% in employment, a huge number were working in Traveller organisations. I would love to get a breakdown of statistics in terms of how many people are actually working outside of Traveller organisations. That would be really interesting. Traveller organisations are a safe space. We need to create a situation where society becomes a safe space for the Traveller community and that, no matter where they go in society - the workplace, socialising or retail - they would be treated as equals. It is a slow move towards that.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Senator Rabbitte will pick up the piece about the public sector. As a committee, that is something we should try to push. The State has to lead by example in terms of trying to improve the employability of the Travelling community.

An Cathaoirleach: We discussed our work programme in private session. That is certainly something that we will be placing on our agenda too. We need to create much greater improvement.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: It is quite damning that there is no participation. I thank the Cathaoirleach.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I will come in on exactly that point. Our statistics show that only 3% of the overall workforce comprises people with additional needs. Last year when we made our submission to the UN, we signed our agreement to double that to 6%. However, at the same time, it has to go wider than just disability. Our workforce is at 3.4% unemployment, yet 61% of the Traveller community is unemployed. I totally agree with what Ms O'Neill was saying in relation to the safe space. I would love to see how many are involved in employment outside the framework of the Traveller community *per se*. Ms O'Neill talked about the ESB, which is great, but it is a semi-State organisation, so it should be great. So should Uisce Éireann, so should Coillte and so should our hospitals, particularly our level 3 hospitals. I have seen great work in the Naas level 3 hospital, which has worked with the local disability organisation to give people the opportunity to partake and find work through it. We have the OWL programme here in Leinster house, which is a phenomenal programme. Every two years, ten people come through. It is a segue into accessing employment in different Departments. It is up to us to start and lead by example. That comes under the Equal Status Act. We talked about safe spaces but everybody should feel safe in accessing employment. Everybody should feel that they are part of the community in accessing that employment. There should not be any differentiation, be it based on skin colour, ethnicity, religious background or whatever. Unfortunately, that is not where we are. Employment in the disability area is only 3% and we have to double it because we are second-worst in Europe from a disability point of view. From a racism point of view, I would say we are probably worst in class, reading the statistics here.

In regard to the work programme, I think we should lead by example. Deputy McGrath is right. There is value in what the witnesses' group does and in how it gets the best bang for its buck. The State cannot do it all either. It needs people to support others into employment and to step through the challenges that arise. Many problems will arise.

Going back to talking about Clondalkin, I was out there this morning. My daughter is on a placement in Tallaght hospital, so I was out there early this morning. She is a first-year nurse. Tallaght hospital is a level 4. Children's Health Ireland is going out there. I see South Dublin County Council. I see loads of opportunities for people to partake or get experience within. We have to lead by example. The education and training boards, ETBs, have a part to play in that. I am not saying that agencies do not do well out there.

I am just mentioning it as an example.

The community employment programme was mentioned earlier on. I understand CE because we see it out in the sticks as well. We understand the value of CE because CE administrators now accept people onto their schemes who have a disability allowance. It would be a great joint committee space at some stage, and we had this with the Minister of State, Deputy Kieran O'Donnell, between ourselves and the social protection committee. With some of our schemes such as Tús, the rural social scheme or CE, some people might be more comfortable in certain environments of work than in the very structured 37-hour week. If we can bring them through the pathways of gaining confidence, community employment is very good at making a person work ready, getting him or her through the Safe Pass, and for learning the opportunities for the trades, but in a very controlled and measured pace until the person has gained that confidence to partake.

I asking these questions because I am wondering if there is an opportunity with the three programmes. With the witnesses' experience, this may be a model we could look at for getting people employment ready, regardless of ethnicity and background, and that it would be a safe space, going back to Ms O'Neill's words, to start the first steps, fearless of forms. What do they think?

Ms Lyndsey O'Neill: Can I just clarify the question? I am a big fan of CE schemes if it is the right fit and if there is definitive progression with it, if the person is being brought in and his or her needs are assessed, then he or she is given the right fit in terms of the educational attainment piece on it or the work piece, and then if there is upskilling as the person goes along. If a person is coming from generational unemployment with lack of experiences of work, or if the person has been out of work, there will be those expectations that work can put on the person such as showing up, fitting in and doing the job, and the CE schemes do create that bridging space for somebody into employment.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Representatives from the Ana Liffey centre were in before us at the social protection committee. Perhaps we also need to look at how our model to get people work ready needs to change. Because we are in a full work environment, maybe there is an opportunity now for us to take our time with people, to address the intergenerational gaps that might have been there along the way, and to culturally bring people along to that workspace. As opposed to a CE scheme being a three-year work programme in the past, maybe that needs to be extended to five years so the person becomes accustomed to how he or she can partake in a measured environment of 20 hours per week.

An Cathaoirleach: It is certainly something we can look at in the committee's work programme for how we could formulate-----

Senator Anne Rabbitte: With the other Departments.

An Cathaoirleach: With social enterprise, perhaps there is a-----

Senator Anne Rabbitte: What is really unfortunate for really good organisations like those here today is them not knowing if they are going to get the funding next year. This is a huge element. If the organisations are supporting people back into employment, then the workers in the organisations need to know that they themselves have the job security to bring people through the pathways. A joined-up piece is required in the funding of such organisations.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: A huge piece for us is that kind of multi-annual funding and security for people-----

An Cathaoirleach: It is security of tenure for the programmes.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: Exactly. We have fabulous colleagues. We have brilliant people and it is tough. People are working with tough issues and they are trying to support people who are facing all sorts of barriers into employment, not just on the Traveller employment programme but also on the migrants programme and the disabilities programme. They do an incredible job and they do it with that degree of uncertainty. We would welcome anything that would help with that.

An Cathaoirleach: We could give support to that certainly.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: We would be very open to coming in and talking to the members further on changing that work model. We have a model of the way we work with people, that very intensive work that we do, and some individuals need it. Some migrants arrive in Ireland and they are ready to go to work but some are fleeing trauma, trying to get themselves set up in difficult conditions and they need support and people working with them to get them into employment.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Before my colleague comes in I will mention a fantastic project in the US called the national access project. It looks at people who are leaving the justice system, as was mentioned here, or people who have been traumatised through the education system, and how people have landed on shores and do not know how to engage. There are opportunities here, but definitely there has to be a connection with our colleagues in the committee on social protection because it all has the same thread going through it.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I apologise for being late as I had a number of commitments this morning with a question for the Tánaiste in the Dáil, and we also launched a Bill on animal welfare. I just wanted to apologise for not being here for the start of the discussion.

I want to air some concerns. It is a recurring theme in this committee. Every week we come here and we hear the really harrowing statistics around the experiences of Travellers, whether it is in the justice system or in relation to human rights abuses. This week it relates to employment. I am really deeply concerned around the State's response and I have said this repeatedly, so my colleagues have probably heard it before, which is how the State responds, how we have seen the systematic discrimination and racism across sectors of our society,and how the State over decades has failed to address these issues. The State's response continues to fail to address this and does not treat this like kind of emergency it is. It is doing huge damage to people's lives, life outcomes and possibilities. We need to have a society where everybody can flourish and where everybody can live their lives to the fullest potential. That is not the case for Travellers in this country and for Roma people. The unemployment rate for Travellers is 61% compared to 3% in the general population. These are stark differences. These are alarming levels of differences, including that 70% of Travellers have experienced discrimination when seeking employment. These are huge levels of discrimination. If it was another group, far more action would be taken by the Government. There would be national awareness campaigns, there would be more robust legislation, and there would be much more done at State level and at Department level to tackle that level of systemic discrimination. We know that employment is strongly linked to health outcomes, a sense of self-worth and to a person's well-being and life outcomes more generally. It really urgently needs to be addressed.

I apologise if this was covered but I would like to hear of examples of good employers or those we could point out to others to say that these are places where things are going really well, where they have really inclusive policies and models of best practice, and that when we engage with them we can say these are some of the workplaces that are really good at having an inclusive approach and are championing diversity and inclusion within the workplace.

An Cathaoirleach: Do any of the witnesses have such information for the Deputy?

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Or anything else the witnesses should wish to add that has not been covered.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: We did give an example of Mr. Price. Ms O'Neill spoke about the example of Davy bringing people in on work placements. Another company we are working with is Bidvest Noonan, which is in services, cleaning, security and so on. They, likewise, have a very positive attitude towards inclusion and bringing people in, and not just necessarily bringing people in at entry level jobs. Their philosophy is around promoting from within and developing people once they come in. They were the first employer to hire somebody from our Traveller employment programme. Again, it is similar to the Mr. Price programme with that flexibility to understand if there are issues when the person comes in and the person is being supported. In that case there was an issue on the ground when the person came in but the company actually handled it really well in addressing the issue head-on and really supporting the person from the programme who went into the role.

There are examples of good employers out there. As we mentioned earlier, we are definitely seeing a movement from employers. Business in the Community has been around for 25 years, and we have been running employment programmes for the best part of that time. We wanted to work with the Traveller community because of the levels of unemployment and sheer disproportion. It was only in the past few years that we go funding to do so. It is only in that time that companies have talked to us about employing people from the Traveller community and have built that into their inclusion strategies and have explicitly said they need to think about the Traveller community. There is a bit of momentum. Notwithstanding that, the issue of racism is systemic, as we addressed earlier. There is a real need to do something to tackle head-on the racism that is out there and have a zero-tolerance to racist incidents, of whatever nature, rather than just saying it is a terrible situation and all of us moving on. As a society, we need to address that.

An Cathaoirleach: No more than ever, perhaps.

Ms Linda O'Sullivan: That is absolutely right.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I thank the witnesses for their time and engagement, for the documents and for coming in.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Ms O'Sullivan and Ms O'Neill for their informative but very stark presentation. It certainly leaned into what the committee hopes to bring forward. We discussed our work programme earlier. To tackle or to assist the witnesses in tackling the issues they mentioned is something we will be homing in on. I look forward to interacting with the witnesses again in the not-too-distant future. I thank them.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.22 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Thursday, 27 November 2025.