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, 12 Feabhra 2026

Thursday, 12 February 2026

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.	

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

Traveller Health: Discussion (Resumed)

The joint committee met in private session.

Sitting suspended at 12.35 p.m. and resumed in public session at 12.37 p.m.

An Cathaoirleach: Apologies have been received from Deputies Rice and Ward. I welcome everyone. I remind all those in attendance to ensure their mobile phones are on silent mode or switched off. As the witnesses are within the precincts of Leinster House, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentation they make to the committee. This means they have an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything they say at the meeting. However, witnesses are expected to not abuse this privilege, and it is my duty as Cathaoirleach to ensure this privilege 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 as to make him or her identifiable.

The agenda for today's meeting of the committee is engagement with witnesses from the Irish Traveller Movement, ITM, to discuss Traveller health. I welcome Mr. Bernard Joyce and Ms Bridget Kelly. I invite Mr. Joyce to make his opening statement. We will then proceed with a question and answer session.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I thank the Chairperson and members for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Irish Traveller Movement. We are here because Traveller health is in crisis and has been for generations. What we face is not a medical anomaly. It is the predictable outcome of racism, exclusion and decades of State inaction.

Traveller health outcomes are the worst of any population group in Ireland and among the worst in the European Union. The most recent EU Fundamental Rights Agency report confirms what our community has lived every day: Travellers in Ireland experience some of the highest levels of discrimination, poverty and social exclusion in the EU. These inequalities are not accidental.

They are the result of longstanding structural racism that shapes every aspect of Traveller life.

Let me be absolutely clear about the scale of this crisis. I will bring some statistics to the committee's attention. Traveller mortality rates are three times higher than the general settled population's. Traveller men die 15 years younger and Traveller women ten years earlier than the settled population. Half of all Travellers die before the age of 39 years. The suicide rate is seven times higher, with young Traveller men at the greatest risk. These are not statistics. These are empty chairs at family tables. They are the funerals of young people who should still be with us. They are the grief carried by parents, siblings and an entire community. They represent a cultural loss that cannot be measured.

We cannot talk about Traveller health without talking about racism. Fiftyeight percent of Travellers are under 25, yet 68% are unemployed. Many Travellers hide their identity in workplaces, apprenticeships and public services because their fear of discrimination is so

strong. This enforced invisibility has profound consequences for mental health. Shame starts to replace pride, isolation starts to replace participation, and our young Travellers learn early that being who they are comes with a cost.

Traveller accommodation remains one of the clearest expressions of structural inequality. Families continue to live in overcrowded, unsafe and substandard conditions, with poor sanitation, lack of basic utilities and limited access to services. If many Traveller sites were workplaces, they would be shut down immediately. These environmental conditions directly contribute to respiratory illness, chronic disease, stress and depression.

Traveller health cannot be viewed through a clinical lens alone. It is shaped by racism, exclusion, poverty, inequality, accommodation, unemployment and discrimination. In essence, until these issues and causes are addressed, Traveller health will not be improved. Our young people are growing up in a society where racism is normalised. Many feel that they must hide or minimise their identity to be safe in school, in sport, in apprenticeships and in public spaces. This has a direct impact on mental health, selfesteem and participation.

I want to raise employment exclusion as a major driver of inequality. Employment exclusion is one of the most significant, and least acknowledged, drivers of Traveller inequality. Employment exclusion is not just an economic issue; it is a major driver of health inequality. Persistent discrimination in recruitment and workplaces creates chronic stress and longterm health impacts. Many Travellers in employment feel compelled to hide their identity. This is harming their mental health and well-being. Evidence from inclusive employer partnerships shows that, when supports are in place, employment and well-being improve. My colleague, Ms Kelly, will speak more to this issue as we go along.

Regarding Traveller accommodation and social determinants, I want to reiterate the conditions in terms of the lack of sanitation and unsafe conditions. These conditions are not tolerated by any other community in Ireland, yet they remain the lived reality for Traveller families and children. We welcome some of the policies by the State in terms of national Traveller and Roma inclusion, Traveller and Roma education, and the national Traveller health action plan as it relates to Travellers. We welcome the work of the programme board on the expert review of Traveller accommodation. However, recognition alone is not enough. What matters now is delivery and implementation.

We have some key asks for committee members today. What is important is a national employment enterprise strategy, which targets accountability and protection for those who identify openly. We would like to see investment in Traveller mental health, including early interventions and crisis supports. We would like to see the full implementation of national Traveller policy, whether it be the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024-2030 or the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2024-2028, all of which would be time-bound, resourced and set out accountability, along with the national health action plan. A key component that we have not seen before is a national Traveller health campaign that confronts racism and ensures access and culturally appropriate health supports. Last but not least, given the crisis and that every single metric and statistic currently there shows that we are falling behind, the Irish Traveller Movement is seeking a formal State apology grounded in truth, reconciliation and a commitment to change.

Traveller health is a human right. It is a measure of how this State treats one of its indigenous minority groups. The Irish Traveller Movement brings a perspective grounded in lived experience and community reality.

If the members have any further questions, they can revert to me or Ms Kelly.

Ms Bridget Kelly: I am going to touch on the employment side and Traveller disability. As Mr. Joyce said, employment is a major social determinant of health for Travellers. Persistent exclusion from employment, driven largely by racism and discrimination, directly contributes to poor mental health and physical health outcomes. Racism in employment is not just an equality issue; it produces chronic stress, psychological harm and long-term health impacts. Repeated experiences of rejection, exclusion and hostile environments accumulate over time and reflect well-being across the life course.

Traveller unemployment remains extremely high compared with the general population. Travellers continue to experience the highest level of unemployment rates of any other group in Irish society. Census 2022 revealed that fewer than one in eight Travellers of working age was in paid employment, compared with nearly 70% of the general population. Traveller women in particular face compounded barriers, with fewer than 8% recorded in employment, reflecting long-standing structural barriers. The unemployment rate for Travellers aged 15 to 65 is approximately 61%, significantly higher than the national unemployment rate of 8%. This rate represents a decrease from around 80% in the 2016 census statistics but remains alarmingly high compared with the wider population. The employment rate for Travellers was around 18% in 2022, up from about 11.9% in 2016. This shows that there has been some improvement in participation, but it reflects that there is still labour market exclusion relative to the national average.

Travellers face multiple stages of discrimination when trying to be employed. Those stages would include recruitment and hiring, workplace culture and progression, access to training, apprenticeships and secure employment. Evidence shows Travellers are up to ten times more likely to experience discrimination when seeking work than members of the settled population.

Barriers for Travellers in entering and remaining in employment include racism and negative stereotypes held by employers, lack of inclusive recruitment practices, limited access to apprenticeships and progression pathways, inadequate cultural competency within employment services and poor educational outcomes linked to systemic exclusion. Approximately 55% of Travellers report experiencing discrimination when trying to access employment, reinforcing cycles of unemployment and exclusion. As Mr. Joyce touched on earlier, identity is a big issue, with Travellers hiding their identity within employment. Many Travellers who are employed report hiding their identity in the workplace to avoid discrimination. While concealment may offer short-term protection, over time it increases stress, anxiety and feelings of isolation, undermines self-esteem, knocks confidence and sense of belonging and has long-term negative impacts on their mental health and well-being. Workplaces that are not safe for identity in expression percolate psychological harm even where employment is secured.

Experiences of racism and exclusion, particularly in employment, are strongly linked to poor mental health outcomes among Travellers. Here are some key mental health statistics. Traveller suicide rates are seven times higher than that in the settled population. Suicide

accounts for approximately 11% of all Traveller deaths. Traveller men and women report significantly higher levels of psychological distress and poor mental health days than the general population. These outcomes are closely connected to social exclusion, discrimination, unemployment and the stress of navigating hostile environments.

Employment exclusion contributes to broader health disparities. Traveller men have a life expectancy 15.1 years lower than that of the general population. Traveller women have a life expectancy 11.5 years lower. Overall Traveller mortality is approximately 3.5 times higher than among the settled population. These figures are stark. The stark differences highlight the cumulative impact of structural inequality, including employment discrimination.

The ongoing need to navigate discrimination, identity concealment, insecure or absent employment and limited progression opportunities creates chronic stress which is known as a risk factor for anxiety and depression, reduced life expectancy and cardiovascular disease. The cumulative stress operates at both individual and community levels, contributing to widespread mental health challenges within the Traveller community. Targeted initiatives such as the Traveller apprenticeship incentivisation programme and other good models out there demonstrate that positive outcomes are possible when barriers are addressed. These include partnerships with inclusive employers, culturally informed support and mentoring, and structured pathways into employment and apprenticeships. Where Travellers are supported and workplaces are inclusive, confidence, participation and well-being improve.

To improve both employment and health outcomes, policy responses must treat employment as a health intervention and not solely as an economic one, address racism and discrimination explicitly, support Traveller identity in the workplace and integrate employment policy with health and education strategies. There is a clear need for a Traveller employment and enterprise strategy that sets out measurable targets for Traveller participation in the workforce, expands culturally informed employment pathways, supports Traveller self-employment and enterprise, aligns employment initiatives with mental health and well-being objectives and ensures that cross-departmental collaboration across employment, health and education.

Employment exclusion driven by racism is a significant contributor to poor health outcomes for Travellers. Tackling discrimination supports an inclusive workplace.

An Cathaoirleach: I than Ms Kelly and Mr. Joyce for their opening statements. We will now move to a question and answer session. Deputy Ellis is first.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank Mr. Joyce and Ms Kelly. What keeps coming across to me, which I have experienced so many times from all the different Traveller groups that have come in from, whether it is those here or all the different organisations, is that racism is the one big factor that is so difficult to deal with and there has to be a strategy to deal with that. In society at the moment, racism across the board is very noticeable. It is more noticeable when it comes to minority group like those present. They experience that in of a lot of things, whether it is health, employment or accommodation.

I often wonder how we measure progress. Look at some of the figures. The different State bodies come in here and give a rundown of what they are doing. That is all well and good – they tell us there is more buy-in to health in the Traveller community and a lot more going on than previously, yet we see suicide rates are so high in the Traveller community. We have to have some way to gauge all these problems. The mental health issue is huge. I do not know if

the witnesses saw the programme on television the other day on mental health. In the community at large there is a huge amount of poor mental health. There are people in prison who should not be in prison who have mental health problems. I am sure the witnesses have experienced that. Facilitating people from the Traveller community when it comes to mental health is urgently needed. They need proper facilities to do that and proper guidelines for how that is done.

Obviously the employment issue has a huge impact. We hear there is some progress and different groups like Dublin City Council will take on people from minority communities but the number of things that are happening is very minor. How do we boost that? I know there is communication between the different Traveller organisations and employers, etc. but we need to find a better way to make our case because it is just not enough.

The overcrowding on sites in Dublin and throughout the country is absolutely appalling. It is there in the general community but it is more prevalent when you look at some of the sites. I have experienced that in St. Margaret's Park, St. Joseph's Park, Avila Park and all these places which are overcrowded. How the hell could your mental health be any other way with this overcrowding? It urgently needs to be addressed.

I have another question and I am still a bit confused as I never seem to get an answer. On a lot of the sites we have caravans. I find there is constant conflict over this type of accommodation. I do not know if this is a question the witnesses can answer but it is something that I have been running through my own mind. Are people open to getting modular units which are top-class? They have them down in Cork. I spoke to the head of the Traveller section in Dublin City Council yesterday. She wants to introduce a pilot scheme. She has been down in Cork to look at the units and she was very impressed. Caravans only last five or six years. These units last 30, 40 or 50 years. We are constantly dealing with people looking for a loan and they come back a second or third time. I am curious as to whether there is opposition to that idea. Maybe that is not a question for the witnesses but it is a question I have been trying to get answered.

There is no doubt there has been big improvements on education. A lot of people in the Traveller community are now going on to higher levels but it is still not enough. We need to increase that as much as we can. Have the witnesses any ideas for improving that situation? In my opinion, it is the key. People need the education and they can be educated along with others around them and we can lessen the whole racism that comes with people going to schools.

Young kids often experience it. They might not show it as much as adults. In the schools themselves, they need to be educated. They need to have special classes and everyone in the school needs to be taught to treat people in a proper fashion.

Ms Bridget Kelly: I thank the Deputy for his questions and observations. I will answer as much as I can and Mr. Joyce can then come in. As Mr. Joyce said, there is a Traveller accommodation crisis. The Traveller community is a nomadic group. Travellers have their own preference with regard to their accommodation needs. For example, Travellers filling out an application form will decide whether it is halting-site accommodation, caravans, Traveller-specific accommodation group housing or a house. In some situations, Travellers want to be housed, whereas others want to live on a halting site. The type of accommodation within the

halting site is the preference of the families themselves. Some families like modular homes and other families prefer to live in caravans. That is their own preference. We cannot decide for them. At the end of the day, it is their own preference when it comes to that. It is great that the caravan loan scheme is there for families and they can avail of different caravans. When Travellers are looking to buy caravans or mobile homes, it is important that they look at the lifespan of the caravan. I take that point on board. It would be down to the individual families as to their preferences.

Regarding education and schools, I agree that teachers still need to be upskilled and better informed as to the situation around Travellers, education and the importance of being in school, but also for them to have a better understanding of Traveller culture and where the community is at. They should be given a background to the historical stuff relating to members of the community. The Irish Traveller Movement has the yellow flag programme which does a lot of amazing work by going into schools, talking about good practice and cultural awareness. A lot of the Traveller organisations do much of this work with the primary healthcare teams, including giving talks in schools. We have made this recommendation before. When teachers are being trained, there should be a module within their training to get understanding of all cultures - not just Travellers but other minority groups as well. It is important for that to happen. There is work happening there, but more needs to be done to upskill teachers on the situation for members of the Traveller community on the education side as well.

As the Deputy said, employment is a big issue and we have touched on it here. There is an unemployment crisis for members of the Traveller community. There are myths that Travellers do not want to work; they do want to work. They want to be given the same opportunities as anyone else. We have touched on the stark statistics in regard to people identifying not being able to access employment. A key recommendation of ours is that we need a national employment and enterprise strategy from the Government. It was promised in the last programme for Government but it has not yet come to fruition. We were told as part of the NTRIS employment subgroup that it would happen and it has not happened yet. That plan will set out key targets and actions to help address the unemployment situation for members of the Traveller community. We also need buy-in from trade unions and the likes of IBEC and other big employers.

Part of the work we have been doing in the Irish Traveller Movement through the Traveller apprenticeship incentivisation programme has been in trying to make links. We have some links, but we need to build on that even more with the likes of semi-State bodies such as ESB. At the national diversity awards ceremony last week, we received an award for the work we are doing with ESB. We are doing a lot of work with ESB, the Housing Agency, which is now on board, and Bus Éireann. We are finding that there seems to be more buy-in from the semi-State bodies than the public service. However, local employers represent a bigger challenge. We are finding challenges with all employers. We need more employers on board. Along with the likes of IBEC and the trade unions, the national employment enterprise training strategy needs to be developed and introduced.

I will now hand over to Mr. Joyce.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I am conscious that we are running over time. Therefore, I should probably allow further questions from Deputies.

An Cathaoirleach: If Mr. Joyce has something to add in response to Deputy Ellis, we are flexible enough.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I might just add two points. First, there is a national action plan on racism in place. It is important that it is resourced fully and implemented. We certainly welcome that. In addition, it is important that people have a choice of modular homes, mobile homes or trailers. However, it is important to have standards for mobile homes to ensure they are high quality, particularly as it relates to the caravan loan. I will not try to open up further conversations that the committee may have already covered, but it is about ensuring that high-quality homes are rolled out under the caravan loan grant scheme which is applied by the State.

Ms Bridget Kelly: The Deputy also spoke about the mental health crisis. There is a mental health crisis for everyone but the crisis is greater within the Traveller community because of all the extra layers of being a Traveller because of our identity, and the racism and discrimination experienced on a daily basis. It is a big issue and it needs to be addressed. However, the national Traveller mental health action plan sets out key actions to tackle mental health issues experienced by members of the Traveller community. I sit on the national Traveller metal health network. It has called for a stand-alone national Traveller mental health strategy to help address the mental health crisis even more. That is something we have been advocating for and it is important that it is developed and introduced, and that the actions within it are implemented. Also, the actions within the existing national Traveller mental health action plan need to be implemented and resourced soon.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I thank Ms Kelly and Mr. Joyce for being here this afternoon. The one thing that will impact positively on the mental health of any young person is the dignity of being able to get up for work in the morning. The statistics that Ms Kelly has presented to us are truly shocking. In any other sector of society, it would be deemed a crisis, and it is a crisis. I welcome the Irish Traveller Movement's proposals which are excellent and could help our committee's work considerably.

We have had a lot of conversations here about employment and apprenticeships in particular, but also pathways to third level education. We saw the wonderful media coverage of the graduates from UL. For many young people planning on going on to further education or even staying in education more generally, does the fact that they are going home to substandard living conditions and trailers that are cold and overcrowded represent a real barrier to staying in education and then to moving on to an apprenticeship or to third level education?

Ms Bridget Kelly: That is the reality for most members of the Traveller community. They are living in deplorable living conditions. In addition to not having employment as something to wake up to and to actually go out to work, they need an income as well. Travellers get married young and so have a home to look after as well as a wife and children. Not being able to provide has a negative impact on their mental health and well-being in the long term as well. It is something that needs to be addressed.

As the Senator said, there are some good initiatives. We have the apprenticeship programme and the colleges have great initiatives. We are starting to see more Travellers go on to third level but again, the people within the college are not aware of the issues that Travellers face at home such as poor living conditions, no hot water and no sanitation. Students may have been up all night where there was no hot water and yet are still going in while trying to stay focused

and to concentrate. How can students concentrate on learning under such conditions? The employment side needs to be tackled. On the education side, there are big issues and barriers that need to be addressed.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: The committee has written to State agencies, the OPW, etc., because many of them are experiencing skills deficits. Apprenticeships or traditional skills, in which I am interested would be a huge opportunity both for those agencies and young Traveller people to find an apprenticeship pathway towards employment.

Ms Bridget Kelly: We have found that with the Traveller apprenticeship incentivisation programme, we are inundated by phone calls from members of the Traveller community who wish to undertake an apprenticeship. Travellers in certain areas, however, find it a big challenge to locate employers willing to take them on. In certain areas, there are popular Traveller names. In a rural area, there may be only one or two employers. When a Traveller tries to get an apprenticeship with a local employer, once that employer hears the name, Travellers cannot get that employer. We are losing members of the Traveller community who want to do an apprenticeship. Again, that issue needs to be addressed. Part of the work done by the Irish Traveller Movement is trying to build relationships with employers. We cannot do it on our own and need support from relevant stakeholders. It has a negative impact on the Traveller community where community members want to work and do an apprenticeship but their hopes are knocked all the time. It is detrimental and no wonder we have high suicide rates.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Yes. Mr. Joyce mentioned in his opening statement the issue of Travellers hiding their identity, which is even more tragic. We, as part of this committee, have had conversations on celebrating Traveller culture and pride but also raising awareness in the schools system. This committee gets very little coverage.

In contrast, when Larry Murrin or someone is outside there is a media scrum. Some of the stuff that this committee has heard in here is quite shocking and it would be beneficial to have wider awareness. On a positive note, there was great media coverage of the women who graduated from UL. We need a national programme of awareness to highlight Traveller culture in terms of its richness, diversity, significance and importance to Irish culture. Such a programme might go some way towards addressing some of the challenges.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I agree with Senator Noonan. This committee and its work have proved really helpful in terms of how we move forward because the community is experiencing intergenerational racism, which has a significant impact every single day whether you are a child, a teenager or an adult or are in education. How people navigate that is well documented. Intergenerational racism has a significant impact on people's mental health and physical well-being. People do not realise the extent of the impacts of identity building and racial profiling. In some cases, it is physical in terms of campaigns to remove Travellers from areas where there is housing or social housing, particularly in terms of Traveller accommodation.

Where does responsibility lie? The responsibility lies in this House. This is our building. Elected representatives represent all the people of this island, not just some. As Travellers make up less than 0.5% of the total population, an unemployment rate for Travellers of 68% is ridiculous. A task force should be established to tackle the issue. A call for a national

employment plan is a no-brainer. It should have happened a decade ago and should not be a case of us advocating for this to happen now.

For decades, we have campaigned for an action plan on racism. Every single ask has been an ask in terms of lobbying, advocating and requesting. There have been changes but they are not coming fast enough. Ireland has really good policies, which compare well against all European countries. However, it is easy to write policy and have it on paper but it is harder to implement, which is the challenge. Ireland has a really good policy on Traveller accommodation and some good legislation on racism but implementation is required.

People must accept that what Travellers experience is racism. While racism and inequalities in society have been acknowledged, people do not accept that there is racism towards Travellers and they nearly justify that. For example, there were a number of cases in the High Court or courts. I do not know any other community in Ireland where, when trying to access facilities for, say, a wedding, a christening or a group of Travellers want to go out for a meal, it is acceptable that a whole town would shut down. The doors remain closed on every restaurant, pub and even hotels. Myself or Bridget could go into a venue with our families but people would pass by us knowing quite well that there are Travellers at the door who are not getting in. These are not simply statistics on a paper but are the real, lived experiences of Travellers. Another example is one in the classroom where children explain to your daughter or son how their parents hate Travellers. That is real and is happening now. That is not a statistic or a figure but a reality check. Perhaps a child reports that there is nobody talking about Travellers but about communities and new communities and then they ask and they say we are not talking about your community, we are talking about other groups.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I am sorry to interrupt but there is a vote in the Seanad. As I would like to speak on this issue, can I vote and return?

An Cathaoirleach: Of course, yes.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I am the same.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I am the same. I thank Bernard and Bridget.

An Cathaoirleach: I have a list of Deputies who wish to speak. It often happens in these Houses where people have to come and go. The Senators will leave and Mr. Joyce can continue making his point.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: That is a reality check for people in terms of both here in the Houses and in society at large. In fact, it is societal racism and a level of institutional racism that impacts on people's quality of life. It is really important that we address those issues because they have a detrimental effect on people's health, well-being and social determinants. The provision of accommodation has a direct impact on people's well-being in terms of stresses, access to hot and cold water and sanitation. Some of these basic requirements are simply not being met. We need to see that a minimum standard is required across the country and ensure it is met in terms of the provision of accommodation, whether it is temporary, emergency or permanent.

Ms Bridget Kelly: While we know there is a wider homelessness situation for all in society, there is also a homelessness crisis for members of the Traveller community. We know Travellers are staying in homeless accommodation a lot longer. They are over-represented in

the homelessness statistics. Across all local authorities and homelessness provision, a lot of Travellers are within those services. Homeless accommodation is homeless accommodation - you are moved from one hotel or bed and breakfast to another. If you have a big crowd of kids and you are all in one room, not having proper food, having Pot Noodle in a microwave, living out of black bags and not being able to do homework properly has a negative impact on their mental health and well-being. It is very hard for the children to stay focused but it is also hard on the parents. More in relation to the homelessness and accommodation situation across all of the social determinants of health needs to be addressed and improved to help improve the health situation our Traveller community faces at the moment.

Deputy John Connolly: I thank our witnesses. I have found that in our debates on Traveller health over the past couple of weeks, we have returned every time to the determinants of Traveller health and to the impact of racism and discrimination on those determinants and how that has brought us to this point. We should be determined to resolve each and every one of those issues. To do it in the way we would like, we would need a magic wand. It will be challenging, but that should not stop us. We should have a safeguard, and that should be our healthcare system. That should make sure that despite the impact on the Traveller community that generates these health outcomes, our health service should be up to standard in order to make sure that we provide adequate, good care. This would ensure that the data we are seeing would be challenged. I do not think we heard before what Mr. Joyce said, namely that 50% of all Travellers die by the age of 39. That is shocking. We have heard a lot in the past couple of weeks - Senator Noonan and Deputy Ellis referred to it - but that statistic is pretty shocking. Will Mr. Joyce share where it from?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: It is from the All-Ireland Traveller Health Study. Some 58% - more than half - of the Traveller population is under the age of 25. We are a really young population, but we are also one that is dying young. Those statistics are so evident, and sometimes I am not sure if people are fully aware of them. They should sound alarm bells across the health system in terms of the underlying issues. It also indicated, as Ms Kelly touched on, that the figures for mental health are quite high and the number of people taking their own lives is significant compared with the general population. There is a responsibility and onus on the State to look at this and take clear actions to understand what is happening and address those issues. There is a health action plan that is helpful, but there are also a lot of deficits within that. We need a high standard of health service but we also need access to the health service to start with. It is also about ensuring prolonged life. For somebody who is 39 and half your population has died at that age, we are losing a generation of our community in terms of our cohesion, culture, wisdom and future. All of that has serious implications for us as a community. That is why we are saying there is no comparison in that regard in any other western country. I called it a health crisis because that is exactly what it is.

An Cathaoirleach: Will Mr. Joyce tell us again where the research came from?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: The All-Ireland Traveller Health Study.

Deputy John Connolly: On the issue of access to the health system, last week Pavee Point advised us that 39% of Travellers reported discrimination in accessing health services in Ireland. When I asked the representatives of Pavee Point how that presents itself, they said lack of cultural awareness, language and the range of staff who work across the healthcare sector not having the same standards and not being aware. Does Mr. Joyce have any experience

or knowledge of anti-racism or anti-discrimination charters or cultural awareness programmes for staff in the health service?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I can add to that because I sit on the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy group. One of the actions is standardised delivery of training across all public bodies. That training is now being developed. We hope to see it rolled out across the HSE and other departments and services. It helps to inform front-line staff working with particular groups, in this case Travellers - our community. It is not just about delivery; it is about how the service is delivered and the way it is delivered. What might be appropriate in one community may not be appropriate in another.

Cultural competency and anti-racism training are important parts. I will give an example. If you are going in, the first person you come in contact with in a GP's office is not the GP, it is the administrative staff. If your approach in that is one of coldness and unwelcome, you are not going to wait to see the GP. That is part of the issue. It is ensuring there is access to front-line staff in a culturally appropriate way that is also welcoming. Societal racism is at the front door of those services. It is also about people removing themselves from those services as well and avoiding what could potentially be a situation where they feel unwelcome. We want to see that changed and clear, tangible actions in order to address that. That is why we welcome specific programmes that are peer led to help support access to mainstream services.

Deputy John Connolly: One recommendation is a national Traveller health campaign that confronts racism and ensures real access to culturally appropriate healthcare. What would that look like?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: It has to be co-designed with the HSE to ensure there is a national campaign across the board. For example, the statistics for Traveller men remain quite stark. While things have improved, the life expectancy of Traveller men remains similar to what it was ten years ago. We would like campaigns to be specifically targeted, for example at the stigma attached to people accessing supports and services, ensuring there are communications and interventions in a way that you would not normally provide clinical supports. Given the statistics, people are normally fearful of seeing their GP because sometimes it is actually too late.

Deputy John Connolly: Mr. Joyce would welcome targeted interventions that specifically make efforts to try to ensure Traveller people are aware of health challenges and difficulties in a targeted approach.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: Yes but it has to be a national campaign. It has to be one that really drives the change, not just developing a campaign. It has to be driven by the Department, ensuring it is co-designed with the community in a way that reaches into the heart of the community. It needs to be tailored in terms of intersectionality in terms of young Traveller people, men and women.

Some of that is happening but not through driving a national co-ordination campaign. That is what I am looking at. We have to drive a national co-ordination campaign. That needs to be resourced at national level.

Deputy John Connolly: What is the ITM's experience of the Traveller healthcare projects?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: The programmes that are currently there are delivering and working to the capacity they can. That is my understanding. There are challenges - Ms Kelly can add to this - in resourcing the programmes to the full. Some areas may not have the staffing levels or resources in place. Therefore, they may not be able to carry out what they are aiming to achieve.

Deputy John Connolly: If the model were well resourced, it would have benefits.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: Absolutely. It needs to be tied to the community just like an apprenticeship, which is a peer-led programme. When the community is employed in the areas, it is then about ensuring they are supported. I will add that what is really important when I use the word "resourced" about the programmes that are there is that I mean resourced in full. I mean they need to be recognised in terms of staff, conditions, employment and ongoing staff professional development. They need to be seen as a peer with the HSE, not as an addition to try to carry out the work of the HSE. We are looking at that because it has to be seen as a career path for Travellers in terms of uptake and employment, so they can deliver that directly to the community in different areas, whether it is in Dublin, Limerick or further afield.

Deputy John Connolly: Has the ITM any experience of the Traveller health unit?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: Certainly, in terms of the national Traveller health unit, although it is limited. In its engagement with national and primary healthcare programmes, however, the unit needs to ensure it is working with the Traveller community in a way that enhances and improves services.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I thank Mr. Joyce and Ms Kelly for their presentation. I read it before I came in. I was stuck in the Dáil Chamber before I came in, so I am sorry I was delayed for this meeting.

Before we started, some of my colleagues said that we have had a number of meetings over the past couple of months, every one of which was a traumatic and horrific day. The statistics we are getting are not surprising - I knew most of them - but to hear them especially from Travellers themselves is shocking whether we are talking about health, suicide, which is seven times the average in the State, or the insane levels of unemployment. The stat I did not know until I read the opening statement was that half of Travellers die before they are 39, which is absolutely shocking. The crisis in housing, as Ms Kelly eloquently demonstrated, has an effect on people in emergency accommodation particularly. I was also struck by a comment Mr. Joyce made. He talked about a child in school talking to other children, where a child who was talking to Traveller children said how their parents hate Travellers. To put that in context, all of them who are talking like that are children.

I found a quote from a young Traveller girl on the Internet the other day. I will read it into the record, if people do not mind. I do not know who the person is. It was the mother who posted it and I do not know her either, but it really struck me. The mother's name is Bridgey, and she was talking about her daughter. She said, "My girl wrote this about how it felt being an Irish Traveller at school and honestly it broke my heart and made me proud at the same time." The girl said:

> Being [an] Irish Traveller at school sometimes made me feel diffrent even when I didn't want to be. There were days I felt small walking in to class wondering if somebody is going

> to say something again about Irish Travellers. Sometimes people would make jokes and be mean ... about my culture and that kind of racism hurts. It made me feel small like I had to hide part of who I am. I just wanted to fit in and not be judged when people treat you diffrently because of where you come from. It can make you feel [very] lonely even when you're surrounded with other kids. You start to wonder what did I do wrong. Being a Traveller is something to be proud of. My culture is full of strong women like my mummy, a beautiful history and traditions. The hurt didn't come from being a Traveller. It came from people not understanding. Racism doesn't just hurt your feelings for a second. It can stay with you and affect your confidence. That's why kindness matters. I hope one day schools will be places where everyone feels safe, respected and proud to be themselves.

That is what a young girl wrote. It is in her handwriting on an Instagram post. I was taken by it and thought it would be useful to put it into the Dáil record. It kind of moved me when I read it first and has moved me again.

When we talk about health, it is about all the issues I raised, including housing, unemployment and all that stuff. Senator Noonan referenced that we wrote to all the State bodies to see what they are doing with apprenticeships and asking them to specifically look at trying to recruit, and having positive schemes to recruit, young Travellers into that. I do not think many of those replied to us, unfortunately. Some have and some have not. I am open to correction, but Irish Rail and the ESB have been the best so far. Yesterday, at the Committee on Disability Matters, which I chair, we talked about Mr. Price, which was also mentioned here, as one of the companies. Unfortunately, it is the same companies that pop up all the time, whether we are dealing with Travellers, people with disabilities or people from under-represented sectors across the country.

Ms Kelly spoke about apprenticeships making a huge change in getting young Travellers, especially young Traveller men, into work, if possible. What more needs to be done? How do we do that?

Ms Bridget Kelly: On apprenticeships, we definitely need employers on board, which is important. As I said, we are trying to build the bank of employers for the Traveller apprenticeship programme. We are doing work with the ESB and Bus Éireann. When the ESB became visible and did that promotional video, and we gave talks, what we saw in the last couple of months, since I was here last, is that other semi-State bodies came forward. This is the likes of the Housing Agency and Bus Éireann are on board now. We have a couple of meetings with other employers as well, but it is still very-----

Deputy John Connolly: Sorry, did Ms Kelly say that has happened since the ITM came here-----

Ms Bridget Kelly: Do you remember-----

Deputy John Connolly: -----to the meeting before?

Ms Bridget Kelly: Yes. Bus Éireann and the Housing Agency have been in contact. Even though they might not have got back to the committee, we see that. It was linked to the committee, but the ESB has been core here as well. We had started a relationship with Bus Éireann and it linked in with the ESB, which helped as well, in how we work together and all of that. That did help. There was a little bit of that but, as I said, it is only a touch of the

iceberg. We need more employers on board. We seem to be getting a little more engagement from the semi-State sector, and some from the public sector, but we need to see more. We are not getting enough local employers. More needs to be done in regard to the employer side.

People should be proud of their identify no matter what background they come from. No one should have to hide their identity when they are going to access any employment or apprenticeship opportunity. Unfortunately, we are seeing within the programme members of the Traveller community who are doing their apprenticeships but are not disclosing their identity because of fear of repercussions. That is based on life experiences of constantly being rejected, excluded and the discrimination and racism they face on a daily basis. We have seen, through time, when they build the relationship up with the employer after a year or two, they feel comfortable disclosing their identity because they feel more safe within that space. Sometimes, people still do not disclose it because they do not feel comfortable and think that if they say it, their employer will definitely sack them. As I said, more needs to be done in relation to that.

As I said, the employment and enterprise strategy definitely needs to be implemented for members of the Traveller community. Our programme, the Traveller apprenticeship incentivisation programme, is going into its fourth year now and has been very successful in meeting its targets. Our programme needs to move from pilot into mainstream. This is our final year of funding for the pilot programme. It is a crucial year for the programme, which is benefiting the community. It is meeting the need, helping the community get into apprenticeships and giving them the skills and knowledge they need. What that does is lead on to pathways for employment in the future. In some cases, it might lead on to self-employment for some. Even though they are doing their apprenticeships, they are developing a skill that might lead on to self-employment as well, looking at it from that angle.

If we do not have the Traveller apprenticeship incentivisation programme, and when there is nothing else on the table, what will happen then? We are going to lose out on all the people we funded down through the years. It will be a big loss to our community that needs it. It is very important, and I will say this to all the TDs, they advocate so that our programme is funded, resourced and mainstreamed because it is a model that is working.

Along with the Travellers in enterprise training strategy, it needs to be implemented and resourced and it needs to happen soon to help to address the employment situation for the Traveller community.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The Irish Traveller Movement is in the final year of funding. When does that run out? Has Ms Kelly any indication?

Ms Bridget Kelly: At the end of this year. We have been advocating all along but this is our final year of the pilot programme.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The movement has had no indication that it will be extended.

Ms Bridget Kelly: We are talking to the Department at the moment.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Which Department is that?

Ms Bridget Kelly: The Department of further and higher education.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Has the Irish Traveller Movement any interaction on apprenticeships with local authorities?

Ms Bridget Kelly: That is what I was saying earlier. Just before Christmas, we had a meeting with the Housing Agency. We are currently looking at the potential of two internships. The Housing Agency is developing an apprenticeship programme for housing administration. We have fed some recommendations into the design of that. We are linking in with it, but it is at an early stage. The work with the employer is trying to build up that relationship. We have been working with the ESB and Mr PRICE for over two years. It does not happen overnight. We have to give them a clear understanding of Traveller culture and awareness. Much work is involved in that. It pays off over time. Since we started our work with Mr PRICE, for example, 50 Travellers are employed in its 70 stores across the country. We know that one young Traveller apprentice is working there at the moment. There is a young Traveller apprentice in the ESB and we are working with it to hopefully recruit more Traveller apprentices to the ESB. This is slow work. It is going in the right direction but we need more employers and more needs to be done on it.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I am sorry about interrupting the committee's proceedings earlier. I thank the guests and their colleague behind me for being here.

My colleagues have talked about the core issues. I will say a general thing and then ask a set of specific questions, which arose last week. I am interested in the witnesses' answers to them, too. I have two observations before I go on. The life expectancy of men and women in the Traveller community and the suicide rate are two shocking figures. They are an indictment of all of us and of society. Nobody sane would say otherwise. The figures are wrong and it behoves everybody to try to do something about them. What is the witnesses' take on the spread of special health workers? The term is eluding me.

Ms Bridget Kelly: Primary health care for Travellers.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Yes, within the Traveller community. The spread around the country, the availability and the effectiveness of the health workers. That is not the nurses and doctors. I am talking about the e-workers.

Ms Bridget Kelly: I thank the Senator for his questions. Mr. Joyce touched on this earlier. The primary healthcare model is a good one. We see that the primary healthcare workers are doing much amazing work across the country. It is important that the primary healthcare workers be placed under the Traveller organisations. They are key stakeholders in delivering health messages to the community but they also bring feedback from the community back to the HSE side and the Traveller health unit regarding health issues that need to be addressed. It is important that these primary healthcare workers, models and programmes be funded, resourced and kept within the Traveller organisations.

The hourly rates of primary healthcare workers need to be looked at. I do not know if they have been or not; I am not going to lie. They are doing Trojan, amazing work and I compliment them on it, because we would be lost without them. I think they should be getting more for what they are doing. That is my take on it.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: They should be getting the same as other-----

Ms Bridget Kelly: I think they should because of all the work they are doing.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That came up last week. How many of them are there, is the Irish Traveller Movement happy with that number and is there a sign of development in terms of the number of key workers emerging from within the Traveller community?

Ms Bridget Kelly: It seems to be Traveller-led, so all the primary healthcare workers, from what I am aware of, are members of the Traveller community. They are all placed within the Traveller projects. Within that are primary healthcare co-ordinators who oversee the primary healthcare teams. Some of those primary healthcare co-ordinators are Travellers while some are settled.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That is a critical dimension. Last week, I raised the concentration of public health nurses. I know they are for a whole area and the Traveller community are within that area, but how adequate is the concentration? I said this last week and do not want to go on about it, but I remember a designated public health nurse in the Traveller community in Cavan, years ago, who did extraordinary work. How are public health nurses spread about and what access to them is there in the Traveller community?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I thank the Senator for that line of questions. They are specifically about the service and delivery-----

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That is what I am thinking. The witnesses' points are very well made.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: One of my former positions was supporting the primary healthcare programme in Clondalkin. There were links with the public health nurse and within the primary healthcare programmes, too. It is important to work in this area specifically on Traveller issues and also to work in the general promotion of health.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That is the case in Clondalkin. How spread is that throughout the country?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: It would be similar to what Ms Kelly said. There is an integrated approach, for example, that is not siloed. Regarding areas that would relate to Travellers in a culturally appropriate way, how that information is delivered would be different than how information is delivered across the mainstream. For example, there would have to be culturally appropriate types of information for Travellers. For images and photographs, you would go out directly to people's homes, on site, and talk to people at their doorsteps. That is a different approach because the community are not going into the services to that level. The services are actually going out-----

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That is ideal.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: That is important, because if that is lost, the connection and access to the service are lost.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: My anecdotal evidence is that right throughout the country, services are becoming too much to go into for the general population. We are not talking about that, though.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: The peer-led approach, engagement and outreach are significant. It is important to do that. The other side of it is ensuring that the data and information collected, including ethnic identifiers, are being used across the HSE to measure how people are accessing, using and in the systems. We know that is happening to some degree, but we also

know from other areas that I discussed earlier that there is a question about whether the community is accessing services once they are promoted. If people go to the public health nurse or primary healthcare programmes, are they continuing to link into those types of support? Those supports become really important in signposting people to other services, be they mental health services, services for adolescents or young people, or services that need supports. They are significant but they need to be supported and resourced in a sufficient manner. We are all sitting around this table and we are all in agreement that the figures that we presented are shocking. However, do the resources match that? Is the Minister for Health talking about these matters in the Parliament? Is it being raised in parliamentary questions? Is it being raised by different parties, including parties around this table?

That is the question I would be asking. I do not think it is. I think it has been left to the Department of Health and the HSE in terms of their mechanisms and support.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: And Mr. Joyce's conclusion is that there is clear discrimination in terms of the allocation of resources between the Traveller community and the settled community.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: Absolutely.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That is a substantive allegation that needs to be followed up and dealt with. I am interested in addiction services, which are needed in all communities. How accessible, available and well-spread are they? I know health education is within the ambiance about which we spoke earlier. Addiction services are needed in every community but how are they there?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: In the work I have done, I have linked in with the drug task force. That is a really interesting discussion. Again, it was about we ensure that when somebody with an addiction is looking for supports from a community, he or she is not stigmatised. That is the first thing. It may be young Traveller women or men. In society, people may be prescribed a medicine to treat mental health issues. People can be addicted to over-the-counter medicines. There are different types of addiction.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: It is multi-faceted.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: Some people can manage that while others cannot. For example, somebody could be prescribed something for his or her mental health but it becomes a way in which he or she is trying to manage his or her mental health but it is the addiction that is there. Diagnosing people early, in terms of the types of mental health issues, is so important. I do not have the statistics or evidence here but I believe that within the community there is under-diagnosis of mental health problems. People use the term "mental health" as an all-inclusive term, to include bipolar disorder, depression and underlying issues. They are not diagnosed in terms of early interventions. Having the statistics relating to that is another issue. If these conditions are not being treated, people start to self-medicate and self-medicating involves over-the-counter medication. It is very easy to get medication over the counter and that is managing the addiction. It could be an alcohol addiction. There are different types of addiction.

The one we are most concerned involves where young people feel a sense of hopelessness, worthlessness and alienation - a sense of "we're not in school". That is a situation where a child

has been more or less told, "We hate you. We don't want you in this school. There's nothing for you here." That sense drives people to addiction. It gives people a sense of hopelessness and homelessness. That is the fundamental part and it is fundamentally flawed and wrong because not only are we discriminating against the community, we are compounding the issue and stamping on top of people and their lives are now worth nothing. We need to address that in terms of drugs, interventions and supports. I know supports are place and I hear some testimonies from young Traveller men and women about how they recovered from addiction but sometimes one does not hear about the recovery in terms of treatment for the mental health issues people might have because they are being stigmatised and ridiculed. It is hard enough for a young person to identify as a Traveller, so how hard it must be for somebody to come out and say "I'm bipolar" or that he or she has other mental health issues? Society is causing that wrong. That is why I spoke about the national campaign. This campaign is about saying that it is normal to have mental health problems, they are not a cause for ridicule and we can treat them and provide interventions and supports so that someone knows his or her life will continue, that he or she can join an apprenticeship programme and that it does not affect his or her quality or longevity of life. Unfortunately, for Travellers, it is affecting both.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I thank Mr. Joyce. I am not being patronising when I say that. That was a quality answer for which I thank him. I will abandon my other questions because they repeat the other ones. I agree with colleagues about unemployment and housing.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: The statistic provided by Mr. Joyce that half of Travellers die before they are 39 years of age and the impact on the Traveller community is pretty stark. That would knock you back on your heels. It is not one I have heard before. Could Mr. Joyce share that research with the committee? I would like to have a dive into that. Mr. Joyce mentioned the health action plan and in his next sentence, access was raised as an issue. How can there be a health action plan when access is not part of it? What am I missing?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: My understanding is that the health action plan is about access and inclusion. That is part of it. What we are saying is that more needs to be done to ensure there is access and uptake of services. The services are very clinical in their approach to the general population. In doing that, they can also be very alienating and uncomfortable depending on what type of support one is looking at. I do not know if that answers the question.

Ms Bridget Kelly: The national Traveller health action plan does set out key actions and it is important that these actions are implemented and resourced. Some of the actions involve looking at access to health services for members of the Traveller community so Mr. Joyce would link in to some of that where Travellers have major issues trying to access health services. Some key actions in the health action plan would include better access to health services for members of the Traveller community.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: What would that look like in practice? It is really important. What would it look like in practical terms? The public health nurse system, which is a fantastic service across the board, a signposting service and a way of providing ongoing access to other services, was mentioned. Are there nurses from the Traveller community in the public health system working as public health nurses? What does it look like?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: We are exploring this in terms of the model. The first model is primary healthcare. We are indicating that this is a model of good practice. The second part is where

we are saying that it needs to be resourced because it is on its knees in some areas so it is not being given the priority it needs. The third part involves ensuring that it can fall under Traveller organisations, which are doing incredible work and have trust within the community, so one is building on trust and working with one's own community. By bringing that into it, one is bringing trust so, therefore, one becomes the person in the middle between the service and the community who is trying to encourage people to access the service. It should be evidence-based.

You should have statistics and data. You should be able to show data from the time Travellers go in until the time they come out. The statistics we have talked about regarding life expectancy, age and early intervention all become significant and even more important. There have to be more targeted measures because the system that is already in place is broken. It is not working for our community. If we know the system is not working, we have to fix it to make it work more efficiently and effectively and to deliver for the people who need it most.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It is not just about access then. It is also about targeting the resources that are available.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: Access is one part. As with access to education or to schools, you need access to the supports. As to whether a Traveller is employed as a nurse or a doctor, the HSE has the biggest State budget. It is in the billions. The engagement with our communities is to ensure that a small proportion of that is specifically allocated and targeted to promote this and to ensure that it is not siloed and that people are brought into the service, whether local GPs, primary healthcare staff or staff from other areas. It is not only that men, women and young people need access. I can access services but that might not be sufficient. Waiting times are a significant challenge. There are also Travellers who may not have a fixed address or medical card. These are particular areas we need to address. There is another side to this. I have said this before in other spaces. Every Traveller in Ireland should have access to medical care by way of a medical card. Such a small community should have a minimum level of guaranteed access to a local GP. Whether you are working or not, we know the statistics you are facing. The chances of you getting past the age of 39 are significantly lower than the chances among the general population. That is a crisis. We must put measures in place to ensure that Travellers have those supports available to them. At the moment, they do not exist at that level.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I apologise for having to leave to vote. That is one of the flaws. Mr. Joyce was speaking on a really important point in relation to education and awareness when I had to leave. That was off the back of Senator Noonan's question. When my youngest was in third class, I asked her what she wanted. All she wanted was a party for all her friends in the room. In her classroom, there were three Traveller children. That was not an issue. The next day, the little girleen came in and said she did not think she could go. My little one asked why she could not. She said she had never been to a birthday party. With that, I drove out to the halting site and met the mum. She said the girl could go provided she travelled with me. That speaks to how parents are afraid of the conversation around the culture. If there were Traveller children at the birthday party, the parents might not have seen that before. It is about breaking down those barriers. The mum gave my youngest a card. When we went home and opened the card, it was blank. I had to explain to my eight-year-old that the mammy might not have written the card because she was not able to write.

Why is this important? It is important because, if we talk about inclusion and understanding, we have to create awareness of the Traveller culture in education. It has to start at the start. We need to embed it and celebrate it but it needs to be known at the very start. While the story I have told is really sad - I think it is actually quite sad - what Ms Kelly has said, which I wrote down furiously, is that we need everybody within the education system to be aware of, celebrating and understanding the culture. Children are sponges. They need to hear the whole story as opposed to anecdotes and passing comments at home, which inform children's brains. We need to start with embedding it within the education system. Mother of God, I do not mean to put more work on teachers or anything else like that. I do not want that but we need to be able to celebrate and understand all cultures. Senator O'Reilly, Senator Noonan and I had a conversation as we walked over to vote. We need to start with the basics. That is where we need to start.

I listened to Deputy Ó Murchú's question. There is an awareness pot within health. The Minister of State, Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, holds the budget for awareness, drugs and everything else. She increased that budget. I only discussed this with her yesterday. We were not speaking about this topic but her budget for awareness campaigns increased by €100,000 this year. There has to be something we can do in relation to culture, awareness and identity.

I think of Ian McDonagh from down home in Galway. He is probably a friend of Deputy Connolly's. He is a friend of mine too. He was in the BT Young Scientist competition when it was still called that. The last project he presented at that competition was all about Traveller culture. He had a fantastic display on it. An awful lot of politicians went to see it. That is the level of understanding. He talked about his grandparents and what they used to do and about his own parents and how, over time, they transferred into living in mainstream accommodation. It is about understanding it. He was the first in his family to make it to the leaving certificate. He was trying to encourage the younger one to stay in education. There is a whole piece there around educational awareness. Mr. Joyce is right that we have lost that in secondary schools. That is my thought process.

I also second what Senator Noonan said earlier, which was that we should take on board Ms Kelly's suggestions. I second that proposal because the suggestions Ms Kelly gave earlier on were phenomenal. Sometimes when we are looking for action plans or a place to start, there are ideas that are very basic but that are also backed up by evidence. I second that.

I am thinking about State and semi-State bodies. Ms Kelly kept talking about the ESB. Looking at last year's Storm Éowyn from a rural perspective, I have spoken to Coillte, which tells me it has about 20 years' worth of trees to fell. We need a combined programme of apprenticeships between Coillte and the ESB not just for Travellers, but for everybody, particularly in rural Ireland. Ms Kelly spoke about how it is sometimes hard to get employment in rural communities. In some of our rural communities, we have a lot of forestry. We are trying to get tree pathways to ensure our lines are protected. Maybe there is something there. Perhaps we should also look to Coillte for expansion. It runs one of its training programmes in the ETB out in Connemara, in Letterfrack. It runs a programme on that out there.

Aside from employment, my bugbear when it comes to this conversation is always housing. It all stems from not getting a good night's sleep and not having a proper address. Our local authorities are making strides in some areas, although we do have a housing emergency and

housing crisis. We have segregated pots of funding for Traveller accommodation. As day follows night, that pot of funding is ring-fenced and protected in the programme for Government but we need to ensure it is spent. That is the point. We need to ensure it is spent. At the very basic level, our Traveller halting sites must be fit for purpose. That is my greatest embarrassment. We have good examples of what Traveller accommodation can look like in the west. Well, we have one very good example. Sometimes you only need one good example to be able to point to. We have a start. In the east, I have not had that experience.

Where would Ms Kelly suggest we start with regard to accommodation?

Ms Bridget Kelly: We could start by linking in with the Department of housing because the Traveller accommodation plans are not being implemented across the local authorities. There needs to be accountability. As the Senator said, there are budgets available. Those budgets are not being spent but the local authorities are not being held to account. They have a five-year timeframe in relation to their Traveller accommodation plans but the plans are not being implemented. That is a big issue and the Department needs to address it. It needs to hold to account the local authorities that are not implementing their Traveller accommodation plans. In a lot of local authorities that have these plans, the accommodation is really needed for the community. They need halting site accommodation and Traveller-specific accommodation, but as Mr. Joyce said, the plans are not being implemented. The Traveller organisations are exhausted from advocating on behalf of Travellers for halting site or Traveller-specific accommodation. For example, I did a lot of work myself with the Galway Traveller movement in the past, trying to get Traveller-specific accommodation in the Galway area. In the Galway area there are Traveller families who have been living on transient sites for the last 20 to 25 years. These are supposed to be transient sites or temporary accommodation but there are families living there permanently in overcrowded situations. We also know of other sites that need to be refurbished. Some of them need to be knocked and rebuilt.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I know.

Ms. Bridget Kelly: We are starting to see some halting sites being diminished or abolished and replaced with housing even though the families do not want that. As I said earlier, certain families want housing but we also have families who want halting site accommodation. Unfortunately, the reality is that they are not being built. It is not happening and that is all down to the local authorities. It is also at a higher level again, with the Department of housing and the Minister. He needs to put sanctions in place for local authorities that are not meeting the needs of the community and the targets laid out in their Traveller accommodation plans. There needs to be accountability and it needs to be done urgently.

The homeless crisis is relevant too. There is a homeless action plan there as well and Travellers are captured within that, but more needs to be done to address the homeless situation for members of the Traveller community. Again, it has a negative impact on the mental health and well-being of Travellers but it is not being taken seriously enough by the Government or the Department of housing. That needs to be addressed.

To respond to a point the Senator made earlier, I know Ian McDonagh and worked with him in the past. The Minister of State at the time was David Stanton and he came to the school, where he met Ian. It must be said that he is a great role model within the community and we have many more role models like Ian McDonagh out there. It is very important that Travellers

take pride in their identity within schools. Ian would have felt comfortable within the school. We did a lot of work with Merlin Woods school at the time. We had been linking in with the school around the yellow flag programme at the time. It just shows that when the model works, we have Traveller children coming out of school who are proud of their identity and proud to show who they are. What they are doing then is empowering and enabling other young people, including their siblings, to feel comfortable and not to hide their identity. The school also developed a better understanding of Traveller culture and where the community is coming from. Ian is an excellent role model.

Regarding what happened to the Senator's own child, that is sad but it is the reality.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: It is the reality.

Ms. Bridget Kelly: Yes, we do have community members who are illiterate. They are not able to read or write, but that said, that parent was coming from a good place. I know that the Senator is saying that it was coming from a good place but when she got the card-----

Senator Anne Rabbitte: The point of that story was that the other little girl was eight years of age but she had never been invited to a birthday party-----

Ms. Bridget Kelly: She had never been invited-----

Senator Anne Rabbitte: That was the hardest part of that story for me.

Ms. Bridget Kelly: I can say, as a community member, that I remember that myself. It is a long time since I left school but I remember, as do other community members, times when all of the students would come into the class and would sideline us. They would push us over to the side as if there was something wrong with us. They would not touch us or come to us in the line. That was the reality for me. I know that some of my own children would not have experienced that. Not the boys - their teacher, John, is here - but certainly some of our relations did. I can talk about my own experience of feeling isolated, being pushed aside and not being invited to birthday parties. I remember going home to my own mother, crying, asking why we were being treated differently. We were being taken out of the classroom when all of the other children were being taught. We were taken out and put in another room. We were isolated, given a pen or a biro and isolated in separate rooms. That is what happened to us. It happened to me but I made sure it did not happen to mine. It will not happen to my children and it definitely will not happen to my community. That is why I am here today, to stand up for our rights and to advocate for our community. There needs to be a better education system and better accommodation for our community. There also need to be better health outcomes for our community. We need better mental health services for our community. We also need Traveller counselling services. There are lots of issues to be addressed but, most importantly, as was said earlier, the root cause of all of this is racism and discrimination. That is the root cause. When the actions in the action plan that Mr. Joyce spoke about are actually implemented to challenge the racism and discrimination our community experiences, that is when we will see real change.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: Just to add to that, we are beyond the stage of young people having conversations about discrimination or their identity. The Irish Traveller Movement has been pushing for the inclusion of Traveller culture and history on the education curriculum. The onus should not be on Ms Kelly, on me or on young people in education. The onus is on the

State to support and resource the only indigenous ethnic minority group in Ireland, Irish Travellers, and ensure our culture is held in high esteem. The State must also ensure wider society is informed, educated and supported in terms of Traveller culture, including music, art, traditional stories and the nomadic way of life. All of that has real importance in Irish society. It should not be frowned upon or looked down upon. It should be held in regard given that we are a people within a people on this island. More times than not we sit here pouring our hearts out, as Bridget has just done, in terms of our story. That is why we are here. We are trying to ensure the members of this committee are informed, that the Parliament is informed and the people listening in are also informed. However, we cannot do this by ourselves. It does not matter how many times we come here to engage and discuss, we need action. We need tangible solutions to be brought forward. We come with plenty of them. I mentioned that we have programmes like the yellow flag and diversity and inclusion, as well as enterprise and employment initiatives that we support. We have various advocacy programmes being run through the Irish Traveller Movement. We work with local members who are pretty much on their knees in terms of firefighting, trying to provide interventions and supports in the face of a lack of resources at a local level across the country.

I ask the committee to give some attention to the Traveller culture and history Bill. It is so important in taking the onus off the community to try to explain itself and putting the onus on the NCCA to roll that out through the curriculum. That needs to be supported across both primary and post-primary education so that there is a sense of belonging and being a part of. We need to focus on the education rather than trying to focus on trying to explain who we are as Travellers within an education system that does not really support or believe in us. I just wanted to name that.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I agree with Mr. Joyce wholeheartedly. Representatives of the Heritage Council were here last year. The council has completed a Traveller heritage strategy, in conjunction with its diversity officer. If that strategy is funded by the Government, it could go a long way towards achieving the objectives that Mr. Joyce spoke about in terms of celebrating Traveller cultural heritage. Knowing the Heritage Council as I do, it will do a fantastic job if it is given the support to do it.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I really appreciate the support of my colleague, Jacintha, who was involved in that, as were the Irish Traveller Movement and youth organisations. Those actions can be really helpful and resourceful. It allows for further engagement. In regard to some of the accommodation issues we talked about, there is no doubt that if we are invited back we will be talking about racism again, and until the issue of racism is resolved, until there is zero tolerance, until accountability and actions are required from all of us, and until we dive into those issues, we will continue to be coming back to discuss the mistreatment, neglect, hardship, poverty and deprivation, mental health issues and low life expectancy for men, women and children. That is not helpful for us nor for members. We need a drive to ensure there is implementation of the policies that are currently there, whether it is the national Traveller inclusion strategy or the Traveller education strategy, the national health action plan or the national action plan for racism. They are driving forces. There is nearly a requirement to ensure that within the Department, at the State level and policy level as it relates to Travellers and Roma, to ensure more resources are primed to oversee this as well as collaboration across different Departments. As an indication, we talked about Traveller formal recognition, but we are still waiting to see what that looks like. We are still waiting.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Sorry to interrupt. Mr. Joyce mentioned an apology by the State.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: We did.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Could that potentially unlock long-term resources?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: In regard to formal recognition, next year will the tenth year since formal recognition by the Taoiseach at the time, Enda Kenny. Ten years have elapsed. The question is what has changed in that time in terms of Traveller culture and identity, We are here talking about Travellers still being ashamed or hiding their identity, feeling they do not have a place in society, and how education and life expectancy are low and societal and institutional racism are still prevalent. It is going to give us some standing in that formal recognition has, for the first time, recognised Travellers in our State. However, it has not gone far enough to address such issues as our culture. I do not want to come back to look at how we how settled people celebrate Traveller culture in the museums, in the artifacts and in archives. I want to be an Irish Traveller today. I want to be in a position to be nomadic and for our culture to be recognised and supported. There is not a big wish list of demands. We are not making demands here. We are looking for recognition of what that means. It will mean that we live a bit longer, that our education is somewhat improved, that we have better opportunities for employment and our life, and that our choices and decisions are not curtailed by the types of discriminatory practice that currently take place. Many people agreed to this and will support all of these different actions we have identified. However, it does not translate into something real, so we need drivers. This committee could be an opportunity to drive some of that. We have not presented in this area before. We thought it was really important to present in terms of the health inequalities. If it means some further actions to improve that, it would certainly be beneficial for all of us.

Deputy John Connolly: In regard to what Ms Kelly mentioned, I have a sense that young people in the Traveller community are expected to take on adult roles at a younger age in comparison with the settled community. Does that apply additional pressures that then have an impact on mental health?

Ms Bridget Kelly: Travellers still get married young so it does bring additional pressures, in particular for the young men in regard to trying to find employment, find a home and facing the daily challenges of being a member of the Traveller community. There are additional challenges for members of the Traveller community, especially the young people. We are starting to see a lot of young people now progressing to third level. There is a mental health crisis and within that the suicide rates seem to affect the men more than the women. Many challenges and barriers we touched on earlier need to be addressed. I would agree there are additional barriers for them, but as I said, we are starting to see the young people move into apprenticeships or third level. Some can be lucky and get employment but we see a good many that do not.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: The bigger question is that in terms of marriages and of adolescence, young Travellers move into adulthood younger. That is mentored and there is a kind of maturity within that. However, when you start to fragment a community and start to move people from a locality in terms of supports, their family and connections, that is where it becomes problematic because the fabric of the community starts to be broken down. That is happening more and more because 25% of the Traveller population is living in Dublin with very few

Traveller-specific units of accommodation being provided. There is no curtailment. County and city plans have Traveller accommodation programmes. Some of the older sites in Dublin such as Labre Park in Ballyfermot still have not been redeveloped. The units are still awaited. There are challenges within that. That is evident throughout the whole country. The challenge really is to maintain the support structure that is currently within the community. It takes a village to raise a child and, in this case, that is literally true. It takes a community to raise a Traveller child, not just a mother or a father but the whole community. The point I am making is that it is becoming more prominent in terms of mental health, in terms of challenges and in terms of trying to manage and to cope with an environment, and the more people are removed from their connections, the more challenging that becomes.

Deputy John Connolly: I take on board what Ms Kelly and Mr. Joyce said about our responsibility to raise this more and to increase awareness of the challenges. On the Dáil agenda, occasionally there are statements on issues. Could this committee suggest there be statements on Traveller health?

An Cathaoirleach: Absolutely. The statistics brought to this committee today are shameful. The witnesses reminded us that next year is the tenth anniversary of the recognition of Traveller ethnicity and it does not count for a penny when you look at the statistics brought here and the starkness of them, that half of Travellers die before the age of 39. If that was any other sector of the Irish community, I can guarantee there would be days and days of statements in Dáil Éireann. It behoves us as a committee to ensure that one of the things we do next week is look back on recommendations that were made throughout the years that have not been met or where we are at with each of them. It would be a failure on our part if a lot of the issues we have encountered in the past eight or nine months, since this committee was established, were not brought to the attention of the Dáil and Seanad Chambers. We will certainly seek that. Further on from that, we need to challenge Ministers and Departments as to what they are going to do to reverse what we have seen before our eyes in this committee room.

Deputy John Connolly: Can the Cathaoirleach write to the Business Committee? Can the committee write to the Business Committee and ask for a slot on the Dáil agenda to discuss statements on Traveller-----

An Cathaoirleach: Yes, we can. What I would like to do is complete our health pillar section, which will happen soon, so that we go with a full picture of where we are at, if the committee is in agreement with that. I think we have about a week or two maximum before we finish the health section. We will produce a report almost immediately because we have all the details. I do not think it has ever been done before. I have not seen it, although I am relatively new. That will be something.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: That would be welcomed. We would appreciate that. Can I make a final point? I know we are nearly two and a half hours in, but we could be here for the full day, we have so much to say. In terms of formal recognition, it will be ten years from 2017. That was a 30-year campaign. I acknowledge that. For us, that was a denial of Travellers in Ireland in terms of their culture. It took 30 years for the recognition to come into place. We absolutely welcome that. In terms of going forward, in Scotland, there was a tinker experiment in terms of how Scottish Travellers were treated by the state. A formal apology was given by the then First Minister of Scotland. That was recognised in 2025. Further work is now happening. The

human rights body had done a report in terms of looking at the ill treatment of Scottish Travellers.

In terms of the Irish context, what I am trying to highlight is that, for many indigenous groups across Europe, Canada and First Nations in Australia, it is not unique for the state to recognise the ill treatment. It is not wrong to formally recognise that we have treated Travellers in Ireland in such a terrible way that we now have to recognise. Formal recognition did some part of it besides the apology, but it is recognising the mistreatment. There needs to be a process where we are in spaces having to talk about the lived experience. There needs to be a process of healing and trying to record those stories across the generations. Our population is dying so young, so those stories are being lost. Part of our culture is also being lost and fragmented within that.

Deputy Connolly asked about young people. Young people are finding it hard to find their place in society at large. That has a significant mental health issue for young people. I wanted to add the point that it is a case of ensuring in some way that this point is not lost in the conversation or the context of health and that it is looked at in the context of addressing what has happened in a way that captures the lived experience in terms of moving forward.

Ms Bridget Kelly: I wanted to come in on Travellers with disabilities as well. It is important to highlight Travellers with disability, particularly around employment. While Travellers experience discrimination by being a member of the Traveller community, because of their identity or being a woman, when you have a disability, it adds an extra layer as well. When it comes to Travellers with disability in the context of employment, that needs to be addressed as well. I have two or three stats here. In relation to disability for under four years, it is double the rate nationally and almost twice the rate when compared with all 12- to 24-year-olds. Mobility limitations for Travellers are more than three times higher than those of non-Travellers - 13% versus 4%.

Disability was not a thematic focus of NTRIS, despite the disproportionate status of Travellers. Travellers are not catered for within the national disability inclusion strategy, despite disproportionate need and a subsequent strategy. It is important that Travellers with disability are included within that. They cannot be forgotten about, particularly with the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy that sets out key actions for the Travelling community. Travellers with disability are not even mentioned in it at all. It is part of the committee's work as politicians. We will be telling them that it is important Travellers with disability are included within these strategies. More needs to be done for Travellers with disability as well.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: It sounds ironic because I am sure it was my own Department.

Ms Bridget Kelly: It is important to mention that as well. We wanted to say that. On monitoring and data, in the total of the 12 ethnic datasets being collected for Travellers by the Departments, these do not discriminate from multiple identities, for example, being a Traveller, disabled and gender type. That is another issue.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I know everybody is finishing up. When we think about disabilities, we should also think about gender-based violence.

Ms Bridget Kelly: That is right. That is another thing as well. It is another ask from us.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank our witnesses for what has been an excellent and shockingly informative meeting. It will contribute greatly to any report we produce, and in any work we do towards making sure it is all right to recognise a community, it is what comes after that and in alliance with that. That is the bigger issue in many respects. We look forward to working long and hard. I thank the witnesses.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.36 p.m. *sine die*.