



Stories of change 10 years of the Traveller Justice Initiative 2015-2025



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PREFACE

This report primarily tells the story of the Traveller Justice Initiative (TJI) established in 2014 by St Stephen's Green Trust, and the changes it has helped to bring about for Travellers in the criminal justice system. It is also a story of social justice philanthropy using its independent funding to best effect, working in partnership with others and valuing the expertise and voice of those most affected.

The TJI is focused on bringing about change to policy and practice, and reducing the number of Travellers in the criminal justice system as a whole.

In the 10 years since it was established, the TJI has worked with a broad and varied range of organisations and individuals. Its principles of participation, a focus on the gender dimension and developing relationships underpin all its work.

This report seeks to capture stories of change from staff, stakeholders, funders, partner organisations and individual Travellers who have been involved in the work of the TJI at some point in its ten-year existence.

It is not a comprehensive description of all the work undertaken by the TJI.

In compiling this document, 16 people were asked to articulate the changes which they believe the TJI has brought about. These include the St Stephen's Green Trust, the Probation Service, the Irish Prison Service, the prison education service, the Irish Penal Reform Trust and Traveller representative organisations. Individuals interviewed included those who are currently or were previously involved in the TJI, and their words are included in italics throughout.

Sources also included evaluations and research undertaken on the work of the TJI.

1

ORIGINS OF CHANGE

St Stephen's Green Trust (SSGT) is an independent social justice grant-maker which works across the island of Ireland. The primary purpose is to make grants to groups to allow them to effect positive social change in areas which trustees deem to be critical. Sometimes SSGT engages with the issues at an operational level when it is deemed to be the best approach. SSGT believes supporting advocacy and activism to achieve social change is the best use of independent funding and this forms the basis of their strategic philanthropy. They aim to work in solidarity with grantees in a way which respects their dignity and leadership in the funded causes.

SSGT has long-standing involvement in work that advances equality for Travellers as well as work relating to the criminal justice system. Two of SSGT's four strategic goals 2023-2027 are dedicated to these two areas of work.

The Traveller Justice Initiative (TJI) traces its origins to late 2013 when SSGT made a small grant towards the publication of the Irish Penal Reform Trust's (IPRT) report, 'Travellers in the Irish Prison System' (Costello, 2014).

As stated in the report, the IPRT had 'become increasingly aware that very little has been documented about the experiences of Travellers in the Irish prison system, while evidence that has emerged from the UK gives cause for concern' (p.6).

The report involved in-depth interviews with ten ex-prisoners, and outlined the needs and circumstances of Travellers in prison. These can be summarised as persistent levels of disadvantage and exclusion which are reflected in living conditions, accommodation, health status, education and employment. These were identified as important factors in the disproportionate representation of Travellers in the penal system, as well as giving rise to cultural resistance to accessing prison-based services; potential for discrimination and isolation; poor physical and mental health; and difficulties in community reintegration after imprisonment.

The research made six recommendations, including one to establish a dedicated strategy for Travellers in the criminal justice system.

Prior to the IPRT research, little attention had been paid to the over-representation of Travellers in prison. Some Traveller representative organisations (e.g., Meath Traveller Workshop and Tipperary Rural Travellers Project) had worked with the community in prisons and their families, but there was no initiative aimed at bringing about systemic change to address the over-representation of Travellers in the criminal justice system.

Following a successful and well-received launch of the research by the IPRT, SSGT set about exploring how its recommendations could be advanced.

We needed to 'move the dial' on the issue of Travellers in the criminal justice system.

There was awareness that the issue of the over-representation of Travellers in prison needed to be handled carefully, as it could be misrepresented as an issue of criminality rather than one of inequality.

SSGT initiated discussions with the Probation Service and Irish Prison Service (IPS), seeking their buy-in to develop an initiative to address the over-representation. Initially, SSGT agreed to fund an initiative, keen to overcome any financial obstacles and barriers that could prevent the IPS and Probation Service from engaging. In the event, buy-in was forthcoming from both the IPS and Probation Service and the approach by SSGT was welcomed. According to senior management in the Probation Service at the time:

My general sense was that there was a big issue, and we were seeing the tip of the iceberg...we were looking for partners [to address the issue].

SSGT then approached Traveller organisations to explore interest and discuss the potential for developing an initiative.

SSGT identified the work of the Traveller Equality Initiative managed by the Irish Chaplaincy in Britain as a suitable approach to working with Travellers in prison in Ireland. This initiative, which worked with Travellers in UK prisons, had published the 'Voices Unheard' report (MacGabhann, 2011), highlighting effective approaches to engagement and support. SSGT requested the Irish Traveller Movement to hold a workshop to discuss the issue of Travellers in prison at its 2014 Annual General Meeting. Conn MacGabhann, the author of 'Voices Unheard' presented the research findings at this workshop, and it was agreed that a similar initiative should be established in Ireland. This was an important milestone:

A key moment was a discussion at the Annual General Meeting of the Irish Traveller Movement, where Traveller representative organisations throughout the country endorsed the proposal to develop an initiative with a specific focus on Travellers in prison.

Subsequently, SSGT established a working group to consider how to develop the initiative. This included the participation of Traveller representative organisations, the IPS and the Probation Service. Following discussion and debate about how an initiative should be managed, it was concluded that SSGT was well placed to host the initiative. It was established in 2014, and the Travellers in Prison Initiative (as it was called at the time) was the first (and only) operational programme established by SSGT.

The initiative's rationale was and continues to be that 'if there is an open commitment on behalf of all relevant stakeholders to jointly develop and implement responses, and to use the results and learning to effect change, then there will be a longer-term benefit for Travellers in the criminal justice system, their prospects for reoffending, their families, their communities and

society generally.’ As will be seen in this report, the unique position of SSGT as an independent philanthropic organisation played an important role:

Having an independent source of funding to undertake the work was important. You need to have spaces outside of the state and the mainstream to bring about change. This is how philanthropy can add value, and the SSGT was well placed to bring it about.

As noted earlier, the TJI’s work is underpinned by principles of participation, a focus on the gender dimension, and relationship-building. Its work is informed by a community work approach, which is defined as ‘a developmental activity comprised of both a task and a process. The task is social change to achieve equality, social justice and human rights, and the process is the application of principles of participation, empowerment and collective decision-making in a structured and co-ordinated way.’¹

Its overall aim is to embed changes in policy and practice that have a positive influence on Travellers in the criminal justice system, their families and communities. It has identified five key action areas:

- Building a knowledge base about Travellers in the criminal justice system
- Increasing and improving access to criminal justice services for Travellers
- Culturally appropriate family support
- Promoting peer support and self-advocacy amongst Travellers in the criminal justice system
- Documenting and sharing the learning of the TJI

The initiative first employed two Coordinators, comprising a Traveller man who was a community activist and a practising barrister (Davy Joyce), and a community development worker with years of experience working in Traveller representative organisations (Anne Costello). The employment of a Traveller with expertise of the criminal justice sector was important during this phase:

We were very conscious that we needed to tread carefully so that we didn’t do anything that could make the situation worse for Travellers in prison and their families. Having the guidance of a Traveller man with legal expertise and a deep understanding of the criminal justice system was reassuring in navigating the work.

Since these initial days, the TPI’s name was changed (in 2022) to reflect its focus on the criminal justice system and is now the Traveller Justice Initiative (TJI). In 2025, the hosting of the TJI transferred to the IPRT. To commemorate ten years of operation and the transition from the SSGT to IPRT, this document captures stories of change.

¹ All Ireland Endorsement Body for Community Work Education and Training (2016) [All Ireland Standards for Community Work](#).

2

STORIES OF CHANGE

The power of Travellers' lived experiences and peer initiatives

Participation is a key value of the TJI. Travellers, especially those with experience of the criminal justice system, are integral to identifying issues and shaping solutions. The TJI empowers Travellers to share their experiences and drive change.

This is reflected in research undertaken with Traveller women in prison, 'Hearing their Voices' (Doyle, 2016), which has led to the development of a model of support for Traveller women in prison and their families (discussed below). Research with families of Travellers in prison, 'We keep going for each other' was carried out in partnership with Galway Traveller Movement (Madden, 2021). Following this publication, further workshops with Traveller activists and families gave rise to the development of a resource for Traveller organisations to support their work with Travellers in prison and their families: 'Through lies, tricks and bullshit, we keep going for each other for change.'

This is also reflected in peer-support² and peer mediation initiatives that have been supported by the TJI, as well as Travellers' involvement in delivering training, events, conferences and other activities.

A Traveller man who had been involved in the criminal justice system spoke about how seeing other Travellers providing peer-based services in prison had a positive impact on him:

For the first time, I saw my community as equals to the prison staff – before (that) the only Travellers I saw in prison were prisoners.

I saw my community coming into the prison, as professionals, and as equals with the prison officers and governors. When you are not used to seeing your community in equal standing like this, it is huge.

Professionals in the criminal justice system spoke about how the visibility of Travellers and their lived experiences provided insights that would otherwise be missed. Travellers' experiences and expertise are central and visible in all the TJI's work, including its steering group and events like Traveller Pride or International Women's Day in prisons.

² Peer support has been defined as a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful. It is about understanding another's situation empathically through the shared experience. When people find affiliation with others they feel are 'like' them, they feel a connection. Mead S, (2001) quoted by the 'Centre of Excellence in Peer Support' <https://www.peersupportvic.org/index.php/2014-12-15-22-41-58/2014-12-15-22-59-27>

The events meant that there was a positive attention in being a Traveller ...they also highlighted the complexity of the situation of Travellers and facilitated a greater understanding.

I have never stopped learning about Travellers' lived experiences... without the TJI, this exposure would not have happened.

Importantly, the TJI supports Traveller men and women with lived experience to access to senior decision-makers:

People like Anne Marie and William – giving access to them to decision makers hearing their direct experiences has been very powerful.

The TJI has presented its work to Oireachtas committee meetings and the District Court Judges' annual conference, the Council of Europe and others. At these events, the voices of Travellers have enabled members of the Oireachtas and judiciary to gain a deeper insight into issues affecting Travellers, especially those of Traveller women:

...it humanises the experience and makes it real. A Traveller woman was talking about the impact of having short phone calls in prison ("six-minute phone calls...then you get the beeps"). She spoke about how – as a mother – she has to share out the calls for their children who are in care...these stories have huge impact in changing perceptions and perspectives – when we met with the Judge who heard her story, he was still talking about it months later.

This increased awareness resulted in a request from Oireachtas members that an application be made to the Department of Justice to extend support services for Traveller women and their families.

You had senior politicians saying about the work 'we need to see more of this'.

At the behest of Senator Eileen Flynn members of the Oireachtas have visited Dóchas Women's Centre, Oberstown Children Detention Campus³ and Castlerea prison to see first-hand the issues for Travellers in the criminal justice system. A delegation from the Council of Europe accompanied TJI and National Traveller Women's Forum on a visit to Dóchas.

The TJI has worked with Traveller-led initiatives in their prison-based work. Supporting the introduction of peer-mediation by the Traveller Mediation Service (TMS) to prisons was a major initiative. This was first introduced to Castlerea prison in 2016, in collaboration with the prison school, and following an approach by the prison governor to the TJI to help them address conflict between Travellers in the prison. It is currently delivered across four prison sites.⁴ According to the TMS:

³ Oberstown Children Detention Campus provides a safe and secure environment for young people sentenced or remanded to custody by the Courts.

⁴ At the time, the TMS was called the Midland Traveller Mediation and Conflict Initiative.

The TJI supported our access to the prison to deliver peer mediation training. When we were there, they funded two evaluations of our work. We would not have had the resources ourselves to do this work.

As a result of the work of the TMS in the prisons, there were, according to an IPS staff member, several impacts:

You could really feel around the place that there was a reduced tension...There definitely resulted in an increased awareness of mediation in the prison – and Travellers who came into prison knew about it – they asked for it directly...they sought it out.

The training of prisoners to become peer mediators was a ‘wow’ moment.

The work of the TJI was credited with bringing about change for Traveller organisations in their work with criminal justice bodies:

The TJI has opened a lot of doors for Traveller organisations... there is a lot of engagement [with us] now from the prisons and probation that was not there before the TJI.

Gathering the data – introduction of the ethnic identifier

The TJI has stressed the importance of gathering accurate statistics on the numbers of Travellers in the Irish prison and probation systems since 2014. The over-representation of Travellers and inaccuracy of existing data was recognised:

Everyone knew the official data was not reliable. In Castlerea, the Governor and prison staff agreed that the numbers were far higher than the official stats.

However, there was uncertainty about how to collect the data across the criminal justice agencies. According to one manager:

There was always a concern (with data collection) that we didn’t want to be seen as profiling...we were unsure about how to do it.

The role of the TJI in supporting the introduction of the ethnic identifier was critical. This included researching and publishing good practice guidance on how best to introduce ethnic data collection in prisons. Pavee Point were contracted by TJI to provide training to staff in the IPS (and later to Probation Services) in asking the question of the ethnicity of prisoners, and Traveller prisoners were supported and trained to carry out a census of prisoners in Castlerea prison in 2017:

The census in Castlerea was undertaken by Travellers who were trained and supported to do the work. It was very important that it was Travellers asking the question....[otherwise] you would have the fear of saying you were a Traveller in case of discrimination.

Following this, a census was undertaken in all prisons and the Prisoner Information Management System (PIMS)⁵ was updated. The change is significant since the Probation Service and IPS are among a small number of statutory bodies to have introduced an ethnic identifier. It remains a major milestone for the TJI, even though work is ongoing, and accessing the data and publishing joint reports on Travellers' engagement and outcomes across services remains a key objective of the TJI.

Over-representation and the international data

The TJI was conscious of the need to present the data on the over-representation of Travellers in prisons within a wider and international context. The risks of discussing over-representation were echoed by a number of individuals:

...there were concerns about what headlines that it could generate: over-representation could gain a kneejerk reaction 'because [Travellers] commit more crimes'.

The TJI commissioned international research and produced a briefing paper in 2019 which showed how Travellers' experiences mirror those of other minority and indigenous groups facing systemic discrimination. This was significant in the change that it helped to bring about:

It helped to shift the narrative – away from one of blaming Travellers for the over-representation.

There is an openness and attitudes have changed – there is an absolute recognition of the disproportionate representation and that we need to do more.

This evidence helped change perceptions and empowers Traveller organisations in dispelling myths about cultural criminality:

Attitudes have changed – some of the research work has been very useful – for example the information on over-representation...

In clear and plain terms, we could see that the experience of Travellers was exactly like that of indigenous and Black communities elsewhere.

Crucially, the research and briefing presented the causes and drivers of this over-representation from international research and applied them to the context of Travellers.

⁵ PIMS is an electronic database operated by the IPS that holds all prisoner records.

It drew from international research and evidence. Then it took this information and applied it to Ireland – for example, the practices of assimilation of minority groups and then how the Commission of Itinerancy in Ireland did the same thing, same with poverty and discrimination. I believe that this was an eye-opening moment, and the insight changed the views of a lot of people.

It has increased the knowledge within those who work in the prison service, and attitudes have changed.

Making services more accessible

Improving services in the criminal justice system so that they are appropriate to the needs of Travellers is a key action area of the TJI. In 2016, the TJI collaborated with the CDETb to launch a pilot initiative in Dublin prisons, assigning a designated Traveller Liaison Teacher (TLT) to each prison. The TJI provided support to each of the TLTs around the issues affecting Travellers and invited TLTs to attend various events including a conference hosted by the Traveller Counselling Service for Traveller organisations. One of the TLTs spoke about the insight gained from these opportunities:

We attended the Traveller Counselling Service conference in 2017, where we learned about internalised oppression, high suicide rates, and wide-ranging discrimination, which affect the Traveller community. Reflecting on the 1963 Commission on Itinerancy shocked us in the ETB into raising questions about how we engage with Travellers, or indeed if we engage with the educational needs of Travellers in our prisons. When asked ‘how many Travellers attend your school?’, we could not answer because we did not know, and we were afraid to ask our students if they were members of the Travelling Community.⁶

The learning from this initial pilot was documented in an evaluation spotlight, following which each prison in Ireland appointed a designated Traveller Liaison Teacher. The TJI organises training events twice annually for TLTs. These events provide opportunities to share information about learning and good practice in the various prisons as well as direct training.

According to one of the first TLTs in Dublin, the TJI has enabled inclusion to be embedded into the education system in prisons:

In the beginning there wasn't much support and the headteachers may have been a bit reluctant to release us for events, training etc, but over the years, the service has become embedded into the Education Services to Prisons and is now regarded as standard. It has given a voice and focus to the notion that Travellers must be included and respected in terms of their culture and educational needs.

⁶ From a presentation made at a networking event for Traveller organisations hosted by the TJI in 2019.

More recently, the TJI has been collaborating with the Probation Service to ensure that Pre-Sentence Reports more accurately reflect the experiences of Travellers. This work aims to reduce the risk of overestimating Travellers' likelihood of reoffending, which could otherwise result in disproportionately harsher sentences compared to their settled counterparts. As part of this action, the TJI convened focus groups of Travellers in prison with prior experience of the Probation Service to inform and feedback on the work so that it would be culturally informed. This input was valued by the Probation Service:

The TJI were instrumental in facilitating it – they got the right people, in the right room, at the right time. It would have been much more challenging to do this without the TJI.

The combination of frontline and advocacy work in prisons (and with prisoner families) was recognised by several organisations as supporting their work. The TJI has gained an insight into issues and enables them to be escalated within criminal justice organisations to improve outcomes:

TJI can hear things via families and can feedback on issues that come to light [within the prisons]. When we are at steering group meetings, things are aired here, and we can deal with the practical issues especially where things need to get escalated.... TJI can bring an insight there.

The Gender Dimension

The TJI has a specific focus on Traveller women in the criminal justice system, and all of its strategies and projects have a gender dimension to them. Its first research project 'Hearing their Voices' (Doyle, 2017) articulated the experiences of Traveller women in prison. A recommendation from this research was that a support initiative for Traveller women in prison be developed. Arising from this, SSGT funded the National Traveller Women's Forum to undertake a feasibility study and develop an operational plan for a support programme. Subsequently, the TJI and National Traveller Women's Forum explored a range of potential partnerships suited to delivering the model of support. Barnardos was identified as the most suitable agency to deliver the service. In partnership with TJI and NTWF, they are currently implementing the pilot support programme for Traveller women in prison and their families at the Dóchas Centre.

Proposals have been submitted to the Department of Justice to extend this work to all Travellers in prison and their families.

Broader impacts

The experience and learning of the TJI has the potential to impact on wider groups experiencing inequality, both within and outside of the criminal justice system.

It has a ripple effect on other groups – if it works for Travellers, it will apply to other groups.

The IPS acknowledges that discussing Traveller issues also highlights broader inequalities:

By discussing Travellers, we also discuss (other) ethnic minorities. There are parallels: if you are an ethnic minority, you are relatively isolated in general society, and in the criminal justice system you are further on the periphery and isolated. The work will benefit other ethnic minorities who may not have the advocates like the TJI.

Probation Service staff also noted how the initiatives of the TJI will impact on other minority groups:

In the ethnic identifier, probation officers will ask about any ethnic minority ...it will bring about information on other ethnicities. Also, cultural awareness training will include wider issues of disadvantage. The TJI have broken new ground, and it increases general awareness.

The changes in literacy support and mainstreaming of inclusion in education in the prison will also impact on wider groups:

The TJI highlighted that many Travellers in prison had low literacy levels and advocated for a stronger focus on literacy within prisons. Enhancing literacy support will benefit a wide range of prisoners who have experienced poor educational outcomes.

The culture of inclusion is...the new norm. There is less tolerance of language and behaviour that excludes or discriminates.

In addition, the TJI and Maynooth University supported two TLTs to develop Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training. This has been delivered to a large number of teachers in Dublin prisons.

The TJI shares its knowledge to influence wider practices in the criminal justice system and beyond. It does this by hosting and speaking at conferences, liaising with academics, and supporting other organisations. For example, the TJI Coordinator has worked with the Childhood Development Initiative's research into family supports and Restorative Practices, family support programmes, National Traveller MABS (Money Advice & Budgeting), community addiction projects, and post-release supports.

Within SSGT, TJI practice has influenced other initiatives and approaches:

With our Family Matters programme, we drew from the model and outcomes of the TJI – for example, the importance of making the voices of the women heard. So the approach has influenced our wider work.

Those consulted from other organisations have spoken about how the TJI has and will continue to influence their work. From the perspective of the IPRT, which now hosts the TJI, there were changes that have been felt for a long time:

It has added a nuance to our work and the frontline work of the TJI has brought an insight into the experiences of individuals – this helps advocacy as it verifies our approaches.

3

REASONS FOR CHANGE

The involvement of SSGT

We could go to places the State could not go.

SSGT was well placed to host the TJI, given its long history of working with Travellers and the criminal justice system. The IPS and Probation Service engaged with the initiative from the earliest stages. This was possible for several reasons: First, SSGT's credibility, track record and strong reputation:

The SSGT was trusted and regarded as an honest broker.

Second, a willingness to take risks: as an independent philanthropic organisation, SSGT was willing to try new approaches that the State might see as too risky, within a systematic approach:

They were happy to take on the risk and take the blame if it didn't work out, but to give credit to others when it did work out.

To be innovative, you need to take risks but there was a systematic approach undertaken.

Third, funding challenges and constraints: criminal justice organisations must prioritise security which can limit funding for other activities. Having the TJI as a separate entity helped overcome constraints, not least relating to funding.

It helped that the TJI was separate as there are competing demands – and the statutory obligations around security trumps other concerns. A dedicated ringfenced funding and focus is needed and some lever to hold this funding was needed – and the SSGT provided this.

When the TJI was first established, SSGT provided 70 percent of the funding. After a few years, the Probation Service and IPS funded 70 percent of its work (with SSGT reducing its funding to 30 percent). Since 2024, it has been fully funded by the Probation Service and the IPS. For some interviewed, the most significant evidence of change has been the willingness of the IPS and the Probation Service to fund the TJI as well as the initiatives that it has driven.

Relationships

As outlined above, the TJI provided guidance and supported change within the organisations:

We are grappling with some of the issues – if it weren't for the TJI, we would be operating in a vacuum.

TJI's success is built on strong partnerships and trust, which allowed frank discussion:

...they were honest brokers, [with a] solid reputation. People we were dealing with were clear and direct about what needed to be done. We did have robust conversations, but I never found this undermining.

These relationships are facilitated through the TJI steering group which includes the membership of the IPS, Probation Service, service providers, Traveller organisations and Travellers with lived experience of the criminal justice system. It is chaired by a Traveller woman (Maria Joyce, Coordinator, National Traveller Women's Forum).

Through its steering group, the TJI facilitates criminal justice organisations and Traveller organisations to forge new working relationships. For example, it has resulted in Traveller organisations delivering cultural competency training to the probation and prison services:

The Probation Service asked TJI for their assistance in relation to cultural awareness training. They could make the links.

The Coordinator's capacity for networking and facilitating relationships through the steering group was widely acknowledged:

[she] is a great conduit and facilitator to link people up with each other. This is a skillset that is often overlooked.

The role of the TJI Coordinator

The TJI Coordinator, who works part-time, was key in driving change. Her background in community development particularly in Traveller representative organisations, focus on outcomes, and ability to build relationships has made her highly effective

In terms of relationships, she is inspirational.

Through the Coordinator (and steering group), the TJI facilitates criminal justice organisations and Traveller organisations to forge new working relationships.

New relationships have been developed and TPI has been the catalyst for this, under the supreme leadership of Anne Costello, engaging the senior management, as well as elected representatives and groups on the ground. She is a supreme communicator and is absolutely respected in the community.

Evidence-based change

The TJI, supported by SSGT's systematic approach adopted a model to fund pilot initiatives, assess their impact and then advocate for their mainstreaming. For example, the pilot peer support programmes in prisons were initially funded by SSGT and supported in their development by the TJI. In 2017, Meath Traveller Workshop commissioned an evaluation, funded by the TJI. A toolkit and guidelines were later published together by the TJI and Meath Traveller Workshop.⁷

Within a two-year period of the peer support pilot, funding for four projects was mainstreamed by the IPS (in 2018).

The approach and model of the TJI is outlined in the diagram below:



Before TJI, some programmes existed for Travellers in prison and probation services, but they were ad hoc. TJI aimed to create a more comprehensive, structured response.

The TJI brought a strategic, structured and coordinated approach.

They were always focused on having a big impact and came from it with an analytical and well researched and evidenced approach.

The work is evidence-based, and learning is central to its work.

Being in a philanthropic organisation has been central to developing this approach to work:

We learn through our grant giving activities. Capturing outcomes and learning from the experiences of grant giving is central to the work and helps us to understand how we create social benefit.

As a result, the TJI's model has valuable lessons for philanthropy:

You need to have spaces outside of the State and the mainstream to bring about change. There are important lessons for philanthropy in Ireland.

This approach permeates the work of the TJI, and it includes evaluation, capturing impacts and learning from its work and supporting partner organisations to do likewise. The TJI has produced over 15 briefing sheets, evaluations, spotlights and guides to date.

⁷ Which had been delivering peer support in Wheatfield prison.

Support for change

The TJI has worked with organisations to bring about change, in a constructive and problem-solving way. TJI's rationale emphasises the importance of 'open commitment' as a fundamental prerequisite for progress. This support, provided by the Coordinator, enables individuals and organisations to become agents of change:

Most people want to change and be inclusive, but they need help to navigate this, and we all need direction....meeting and working with Anne gave me the language of how to change and explained a lot about internalised oppression and other issues that I wouldn't have been aware of. Having this knowledge and language really helps us all to interrogate our thinking and how we respond.

This was also highlighted in the 2021 evaluation of the TPI:

TPI adopted an approach of working with us in bringing about change. In many ways, we were able to say, 'I am not sure how to do this'? I was not afraid to ask questions...They provided us with the tools and the understanding...they helped us to see what we needed to see.

This work continues with the TJI role in supporting networking and training. For example, it continues facilitating and supporting a network of peer support groups, and it facilitates a network of Traveller Liaison Teachers.

Wider partnerships

The TJI places Travellers and Traveller representative organisations at the centre of its work, and initiatives that it has supported or developed are predominantly Traveller-led. The value of this approach was recognised by President Michael D. Higgins in his keynote address to the initiative's second national conference in 2021, when he referred to TPI as:

An exemplar initiative in its placing Travellers' participation front and centre in all you do, recognising as it does that policies and programmes targeted at Travellers will not be effective without the meaningful participation of Travellers at the design, implementation and monitoring stages.

The graphic below lists some of the key partners of the TJI in the delivery of initiatives. By developing partnerships with multiple organisations, the TJI can create impact beyond its own resources, as an initiative employing one part-time staff member.

We are definitely punching above our weight.

TJI also aims to widen the remit of other, mainstream organisations which deliver specific initiatives, including Traveller Mothers Family Support (delivered by Barnardos), delivery of education supports targeted at Travellers (through Traveller Liaison Teachers) and the delivery of a targeted youth support programme in Oberstown Children Detention Campus. The figure below lists organisations that the TJI has supported and collaborated with in developing new initiatives.



4

LOOKING AHEAD: EXPECTATIONS FOR CHANGE

During SSGT's strategic planning process in 2023 it reflected on whether a grant-making organisation was the best place for an operational initiative such as TJI. The original reason to host TJI no longer held given how it was now integrated into the criminal justice sector and was 70 percent funded by the IPS and Probation Service. TJI consulted widely among stakeholders and explored alternative hosting organisations. In 2024, the boards of SSGT and IPRT agreed that TJI be transferred, initially on a secondment basis and permanently from April 2025.

Accordingly, in 2025, the hosting of the TJI transferred to the IPRT, and it is widely viewed as a suitable host due to its focus on the penal and criminal justice system.

We spoke to Traveller organisations. It felt like a natural home as the initial report came from the IPRT. Traveller organisations were comfortable as it indicates that the issue is not niche one.

Despite significant progress, the TJI's work is ongoing. Continued efforts are needed in data collection and using the ethnic identifier to understand Travellers' experiences and address inequalities in the criminal justice system. There is also a need to extend peer-support and peer-mediation across the entire prison estate. The IPS recognised this need, and its Director General, Caron McCaffrey, committed to applying TJI's initiatives across all prison. At her address to the TJI 2021 conference, she noted that:

There are 12 prisons in Ireland – we acknowledge that all of these actions and initiatives need to have a presence across the whole of the prison estate, and we look forward to continuing our work with the TPI to make this happen.

The root causes must be addressed – the criminal justice system alone cannot fix the issue of the over-representation of Travellers in prison. But we have a really important part to play – and we are committed to playing our part and look forward to working with the TPI in doing so.

Ultimately, the need for Travellers to become workers in the criminal justice sector was noted by Michael McDonagh (RIP) who had pioneered peer support work in Wheatfield prison, which was the first peer support project supported by SSGT and TJI. He spoke of the importance of supporting Travellers to become prison officers, social workers, teachers and other roles at a networking event for Traveller organisations in 2019 that was hosted by the TJI.

We need to mainstream Traveller employment in the IPS – there are two prison officers at the moment and only one identifies as a Traveller. We need to reach the stage that Travellers are part of the prison staff – this impacts on behaviour...and once behaviour has changed, attitudes will change too.

Finally, the TJI's approach provides valuable lessons for collaboration between philanthropy, community, and government. Its mix of frontline work, research, advocacy, strong governance, and partnerships — especially through its steering group — was highlighted as a model worth replicating.

It is an interesting model and one that should be replicated. The model of advocacy and frontline initiatives, tight governance and relationships and having the [criminal justice] parties sitting around the table is a very good model for others to follow.

Conclusion

This report documents the approach taken by the Traveller Justice Initiative over the last ten years, highlighting some of the activities, characteristics and outcomes of its work.

Collectively, these stories capture the community development approach taken by TJI with relationship building, participation, empowerment, and a collective emphasis as key features. On-going reflection and analysis are important working methods, built into its work to ensure continued relevance. The governance and staffing of the TJI - their worldview, working methods and skill base - is highly significant. The community development approach, with social justice at its core, necessitates staff who are adept at building relationships with all with whom they work, and innovative funders who are willing to understand that change is not linear, and results can be unexpected. Credit should also be given to the individuals, agencies and services in both the community sector and the criminal justice services, who have worked with TJI in constructive, creative and ambitious ways.

TJI's work aims to create change at individual, community and structural levels by addressing both the causes and consequences of the over-representation of Travellers in the criminal justice system. Interviewees point to the transformational impact of the work on individual Travellers, their families, the wider community and on the services with which Travellers engage, both within and outside the criminal justice system. The potential for a wider impact on other communities is also apparent.

The issues which the TJI seeks to address are complex, challenging and entrenched and despite the achievements to date, many difficulties for Travellers in the criminal justice system remain.

However, we also know that solutions are both possible and within our grasp. We look forward to continuing to work with stakeholders, collectively, and in solidarity, for justice.

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MILESTONES OF CHANGE

2014	Publication of Travellers in the Criminal Justice System by IPRT.
2014	<p>St Stephen's Green Trust establishes the Travellers in Prison Initiative (TPI). Funding is received from the IPS and Probation Service as a contribution to its costs.</p> <p>A steering group is established with the membership of St. Stephens Green Trust, IPS, Irish Probation Service, Exchange House, Irish Penal Reform Trust, Irish Traveller Movement, Meath Travellers, Traveller Mediation Service, Pavee Point, National Traveller Women's Forum, and The Traveller Counselling Service, Mincéirs Whiden, IASIO, National Traveller MABS, the HSE Social Inclusion Unit, the Irish Red Cross, City of Dublin Education and Training Board, and Parish of the Travelling People.</p> <p>Funding for peer support project in Wheatfield prison is provided by SSGT and delivered by Meath Traveller Workshop.</p>
2015	Recruitment of two part-time Coordinators (Davy Joyce and Anne Costello). TPI develops its first three-year strategic plan.
2016	Three additional peer support projects are funded by SSGT, and delivered by Tipperary Rural Traveller Project, Laois Traveller Action Group and the National Traveller Women's Forum.
2017	<p>TPI hosts a national conference in Dublin Castle on its work.</p> <p>TPI commissions and publishes research into the experience of Traveller women in prison 'Hearing Their Voices'</p> <p>TPI supports Traveller Mediation Service to undertake an evaluation of its pilot peer mediation training programme in Castlerea prison.</p> <p>TPI publishes research and guidelines into using ethnic identifiers in Irish prisons based on good practices in other jurisdictions.</p> <p>Training delivered by Pavee Point and the TPI to Travellers in Castlerea prison to undertake a census of Travellers in the prison. Census is undertaken in Castlerea prison (as a pilot) and subsequently in all prisons.</p> <p>Training delivered by Pavee Point and the TPI to staff in all prisons.</p>
2018	<p>Ethnic identifier established in the IPS using CSO national census format and applied across all prisons.</p> <p>Peer support pilots are evaluated, and the IPS mainstreams the funding for all four.</p> <p>The Coordinator of the National Traveller Women's Forum is appointed chairperson the TPI steering group.</p> <p>The TPI develops its second three-year strategic plan.</p>

2019	<p>The TPI provides support and advice to National Traveller MABS to publish a guide on Financial Advice for Families of Travellers in Prison</p> <p>The TPI publishes 'Mincéir in the Respoon: toolkit and guidelines for developing peer support in prisons'</p> <p>TPI publishes the briefing paper 'The over-representation of minority and indigenous ethnic groups in prison'</p> <p>TPI hosts a networking event for Traveller organisations in Dublin on the issues affecting Travellers in the criminal justice system.</p>
2020-2021	<p>TPI and initiatives it supports (e.g., peer support) pivot their work to provide information, support and advocacy to Travellers in prison and their families during COVID.</p> <p>The TPI develops its third three-year strategic plan.</p>
2021	<p>TPI hosts its second national conference (online). President Michael D Higgins provides the keynote address.</p> <p>TPI publishes 'We Keep Going for Each Other: Family Stories of Travellers through Prison Times', a joint narrative project undertaken with the Galway Traveller Movement.</p> <p>TPI undertakes and publishes a six year evaluation as well as evaluation spotlights on key areas of work, including its pilot education and 'meet and greet' initiatives.</p>
2022	<p>TPI changes its name to the Traveller Justice Initiative (TJI) to reflect its wider criminal justice sector work.</p> <p>National Traveller Women's Forum develops an 'Operational Model of Support for Traveller Women in Prison and their Families', with funding and support received from SSGT and TJI.</p> <p>TJI partnered with The Irish Traveller Movement (ITM) and the Irish Network Against Racism (INAR) to commission and oversee a feasibility study into the potential for a social enterprise that develops members of the Traveller community, and particularly Travellers with criminal convictions, into paid trainers of anti-racism training.</p>
2023	<p>TJI supports Oberstown to establish a Youth and Family support initiative for young Travellers. A Traveller man is recruited to the role of Youth and Family Support Worker.</p> <p>TJI, Barnardos and the National Traveller Women's Forum establish a pilot model of support for Traveller women in the criminal justice system and their families. Funding is received from the Department of Justice for two workers.</p> <p>Traveller Liaison Teachers are appointed in all prison schools, supported by the TJI.</p> <p>SSGT explores options to transfer the hosting of the TJI to other organisations.</p>
2024-2025	<p>The TJI is invited to speak, and makes a presentation with the Traveller Mediation Service, at the District Court Judges' national conference in Limerick.</p> <p>TJI produces 'Through lies, tricks and bullshit, we keep going for each other for change', resource for Traveller organisations</p> <p>The IPS and Probation Service provide 100% funding to the TJI.</p> <p>The IPRT agrees to host the TJI in 2024, and formal transfer of the TJI takes place in 2025.</p> <p>The TJI commissions research to examine the use of early release schemes in the criminal justice sector among the Traveller population in Ireland</p>

Publications of the TJI can be found on the IPRT website: www.iprt.ie



St Stephen's Green Trust

Guinness Enterprise Centre,
Taylors Lane, Dublin 8
D08YE0P
email: info@ssgt.ie
website: www.ssgt.ie

Irish Penal Reform Trust

1 Green Street, Dublin 7
D07 X6NR
email: acostello@iprt.ie
Website: www.iprt.ie