DO TRAVELLERS NEED A STATE APOLOGY?

CONFERENCE REPORT



Report on the Minceirs Whiden National Conference on the Case for a State Apology for the Historical Mistreatment of the Traveller Community

University of Galway • 7th September 2026

MINCEIRS WHIDEN
" TRAVELLERS TALKING "

Contents

Contents 2
Summary 3
Key Takeaways 4
The Legacy of the 1963 Commission and Assimilation Policies 4
Childhood Trauma and Segregation in Schools 4
Internalised Shame, Masking, and Everyday Racism 5
Accommodation, Health, and Mental Health 6
Words Alone Are Not Enough: A Commission and Ring-Fenced Redress 6
Naming Ourselves and Removing the Word "Itinerant" 7
Next Steps 7
Conclusion 8

Summary

On Monday, 7th September, Minceirs Whiden hosted a national conference at The Cube in Áras na Mac Léinn, University of Galway, to discuss the case for a formal State Apology from the Irish Government for the historical mistreatment of the Traveller community. Convened and facilitated by Minceirs Whiden Coordinator Maureen Ward, the gathering brought together Travellers from across the country, including grassroots community members, and individuals working across local and national organisations.

The event was held strictly as a Traveller-Only Space. This ensured a safe, private environment where every person in the room could speak openly and honestly without outside judgement, and where everyone present spoke first and foremost as a Traveller rather than as a representative of any agency. The purpose of the day was to listen to voices on the ground and answer a fundamental question facing the community: should Travellers put energy into campaigning for a State Apology, or should the focus remain solely on urgent day-to-day crises?

To open the conversation, the facilitator welcomed a panel of five speakers who shared their personal insights and lived experiences before opening the floor to a wide-ranging community discussion:

- **Nora Corcoran** (Galway Traveller Movement)
- **Nell McDonagh** (Meath Travellers Workshop)
- **Star Stokes** (Kilkenny Traveller Community Movement)
- **Thomas McCann** (Traveller Counselling Service)
- **Kris Stokes** (Community member and advocate)

Across four hours of honest, emotional, and strategic discussion, a clear message emerged from the room. Travellers are entitled to a State Apology, and the State must be held accountable for decades of destructive policies. However, the room was unanimous that an apology consisting of empty words is not enough. Any apology must be built upon a formal investigation into the truth of what happened since the foundation of the State, and it must come with ring-fenced resources, terms, and conditions that bring real change to the lives of Travellers today and for generations to come.

Note: The views, opinions, and testimonies recorded in this report reflect the individual contributions of the panellists and attendees who participated in the open forum.

Key Takeaways

The discussions across the panel and the floor covered deep personal histories, ongoing systemic discrimination, and the practical realities of taking on the Irish State. Throughout the day, several core themes emerged.

> *"The Travellers weren't the problem, the problem was the system that discriminated against us. And we're still paying the price today."*

The Legacy of the 1963 Commission and Assimilation Policies

A central focus of the day was tracing today's struggles back to their root cause: the deliberate policies of the Irish State since its foundation in 1922, and specifically the 1963 Report of the Commission on Itinerancy. Speakers recalled how the opening lines of the 1963 report framed indigenous Irish Travellers as a problem to be solved through rehabilitation and absorption into the settled population. Every arm of the State, from the Gardaí and local authorities to schools, health boards, and the clergy, was directed not to support Traveller culture, but to erase it.

Attendees shared painful memories of how these policies played out in real life. People spoke of families being forced to burn their wagons to prove they would never go back on the road before being given a house, or fourteen people being moved from the roadside into a two-up, two-down house beside a dump. Others recalled Dublin Corporation employing officials in the 1960s and 1970s specifically to keep families on the move with the Gardaí so they could never settle, only for the School Attendance Officer, known across the community as the "cruelty man", to arrive and take Traveller children into institutional care such as Letterfrack because they were not in school.

This fear of the "cruelty man" and of State services was passed down from grandmothers to mothers to daughters. Older members in the room remembered how communities on the road used to protect one another from these inspections, sharing bread and milk in a poor family's tea chest so the inspector would see food in the home and not take the children away. By breaking up extended families and forcing people into isolated housing, the State undermined the community's greatest source of strength and mutual care.

> *"Every aspect of our life has been affected by decision-makers who knew nothing about us, who didn't give a damn, who tried to put us into boxes... and had this thinking that in order to be as good as, we had to be the same as. Sameness does not mean equality."*

Childhood Trauma and Segregation in Schools

Some of the most powerful testimonies of the day centred on how Traveller children were treated in the Irish education system from the 1960s right through to the 1990s. Speakers described being placed in segregated "all-Traveller" classes with no set curriculum, separate lunchtimes, and separate play areas. One contributor shared the lifelong impact of asking for a book in first class and having teachers brought

into the room to stare at a Traveller child who could read, before being physically shaken by a teacher in the yard and told that Travellers had to stay on their own side of the playground wall. For many in the room, going to school was the very first time they were made to feel that being a Traveller was something bad or shameful. Others spoke of being subjected to enforced grooming; arriving at school in clean clothes their mothers had put on them, only to have their clothes taken off, their hair washed, and their hair cut by staff trying to make them look like settled children. Men in the room recalled being kept in classrooms just long enough to learn their prayers for Holy Communion, coming out after years in national school unable to read or write, and feeling they had no option left but to go straight to the dumps.

Others noted how Traveller children were exempted from learning the Irish language on the assumption they would never need it, effectively locking them out of state jobs later in life. The room agreed that while physical segregation in schoolyards may be in the past, the failure of the education system continues today, with Traveller Culture and Heritage still not properly embedded across schools and young people still facing bullying and low expectations.

> *"The shame that most Travellers carry is not shame about something they've done... It's actually a result of the trauma that we talked about earlier on."*

Internalised Shame, Masking, and Everyday Racism

The conference heard repeatedly about how decades of State treatment have led to deep, internalised shame among young Travellers today. Speakers described how heart-breaking it is to see young boys and girls feeling ashamed to look a shopkeeper in the eye, feeling they must constantly prove on social media that Travellers are good people, or feeling they have to hide who they are to survive.

Several attendees spoke about the mental exhaustion of "masking", i.e., hiding their Traveller identity, changing their accents, or even changing their surnames just to get through college, keep a job in a hotel or public service, or rent a home. People shared stories of young women having to put on a persona the moment they walk through the door of their workplace, only able to be themselves when they get back into their car to drive home. Even in everyday family milestones, the humiliation continues: speakers described being regulars for dinner in local hotels every week, yet still having to ask a settled person to book a hall for a son's wedding because the hotel refuses to take bookings from Travellers. The room noted that oppression has become normalised, and that cycle must be broken.

> *"Let me be who I am, let me be a proud indigenous Irish Traveller. I'm not ashamed of who I am, I shouldn't be ashamed of who I am. I'm not ashamed of who I came from, I came from good people."*

Accommodation, Health, and Mental Health

When considering whether campaigning for an apology might distract from urgent issues like housing and mental health, the consensus was that these crises are not separate from the past, but are instead the direct result of it. As one speaker pointed out, the 1963 Commission on Itinerancy noted no significant mental health issues among Travellers at that time; today, the community is facing an overwhelming mental health and suicide crisis, with suicide rates many times higher than in the general population and life expectancy 12 to 15 years shorter.

Speakers described the current accommodation system as a "vice" squeezing Travellers into homelessness. On one side, local authorities have left tens of millions of euros in Traveller accommodation funding unspent over the last two decades, refusing to build new sites, selling off existing land, or leaving ten families overcrowded onto sites built for three bungalows twenty years ago. On the other side, the 2002 Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, the anti-trespass law, criminalises nomadism and allows trailers to be impounded within 48 hours without the legal defences available to people in houses.

Caught in this vice, families are pushed into emergency shelters or substandard private rented housing away from their extended families. Attendees highlighted an emerging crisis among young Traveller women with small children stuck in isolated private rentals, cut off from family support and afraid to reach out to services in case Tusla, viewed by some as the modern equivalent of the "cruelty man", become involved. At the same time, young Traveller men who leave school and send out hundreds of CVs without getting a single interview are left with no purpose, no trade, and nowhere to go. With traditional ways of making a living like tinsmithing, horses, and market trading legislated out of existence, many young people turn to substance abuse to self-medicate against the trauma of feeling trapped and powerless.

Furthermore, when Travellers reach crisis point and present at hospital A&E departments, they are met by staff who have no mandatory training in Traveller culture or the acute suicide risks facing the community, leading to tragic and preventable losses of life.

> *"I would not be in favour of just an apology... We need a framework that will investigate the impact of assimilation policies and practice on Irish Travellers."*

Words Alone Are Not Enough: A Commission and Ring-Fenced Redress

Throughout the day, every speaker warned against letting the Irish Government off the hook with a quick, tokenistic statement of regret. People pointed to the 2017 recognition of Traveller ethnicity and the State apology to survivors of the Magdalene Laundries, as well as the 12-minute apology given to Scottish Travellers by Scottish First Minister John Swinney, as examples where words were spoken in parliament without changing realities on the ground.

Instead, participants looked to international examples such as First Nations people in Canada and the Sámi people in Norway, where the process began with a formal Truth and Reconciliation Commission rather than a standalone apology. By establishing an independent commission to document and investigate State

policies, Dáil statements, local authority practices, and institutional abuses from 1922 onwards, the full truth can be placed on the official record.

When discussing whether an apology should include financial compensation, the room agreed that while individual payouts to every Traveller in Ireland are unlikely, aside from specific redress that should be pursued for those taken into institutional care, collective reparation is essential. Rather than individual cheques, the community wants ring-fenced funding and structural terms attached to the apology across areas such as; education, accommodation, health, employment, and anti-racism.

> *"If you have to struggle and fight for everything, I think the one thing that's worth struggling and fighting for is the future of our children, and everything that comes with the State apology."*

Naming Ourselves and Removing the Word "Itinerant"

A passionate discussion also took place from the floor regarding the word "itinerant". Several contributors spoke of the deep hurt caused by seeing a word imposed by the government, one that many experienced as a label meaning homeless, still written on the birth certificates of Traveller people and in official archives. While there was discussion about the dictionary meaning of the word, there was strong feeling that a proud indigenous community has the fundamental right to name itself, whether as Irish Travellers, or in Cant/Gammon as Minceirs or Pavees, rather than being defined by labels invented by a State commission that excluded them.

Next Steps

The conference concluded with a focused session on how Minceirs Whiden and the wider Traveller community should move this campaign forward. Rather than rushing to the Government before the groundwork is done, attendees agreed on a steady, strategic approach built from the ground up.

- **Holding Regional Consultations Across the Country:** Working in cooperation with local & national organisations, Minceirs Whiden will work to bring the conversation directly to Travellers on the ground by dedicating its upcoming regional events to the State Apology campaign. Holding regional gatherings reduces travel barriers and ensures that all Travellers, not just those linked to national bodies, can shape the demands and take ownership of the process.
- **Educating and Mobilising the Grassroots Community:** Because discrimination has been normalised for so long, many Travellers do not feel they are entitled to an apology or understand what a Truth and Reconciliation framework entails. Information will be shared through local organisations, surveys, and family networks so that all 42,000+ Travellers in Ireland understand that current crises in mental health, addiction, accommodation, etc, are the result of State policy, not personal or community failure.

- **Setting Clear Terms and Conditions:** Before approaching the State, work will need to be done to establish a clear framework setting out the exact terms, conditions, and ring-fenced resources expected alongside any apology. This includes calling for an independent Commission of Investigation into historical assimilation policies from 1922 onwards.
- **Cooperation Across Traveller Organisations:** No single group can win this alone. Minceirs Whiden will seek to liaise with all local and national Traveller organisations, Primary Health Care Projects, and Travellers working in mainstream sectors to help ensure that as many Travellers as possible are united by the same goal. Alongside a strong Traveller-led movement, the campaign will seek to draw on international human rights bodies, such as the Council of Europe and UN committees, to put outside pressure on the Irish State.
- **Using Key Milestones and Mass Action:** As the campaign builds towards the 10th anniversary of the recognition of Traveller ethnicity, the community will look at major collective actions; from large-scale national gatherings to mass protests.
- **Demanding Structural and Legislative Reforms:** As part of the redress framework, the campaign will push for concrete policy changes, such as:
    - Taking responsibility for Traveller accommodation away from local councils and establishing an independent Traveller Accommodation Authority.
    - Making Traveller cultural awareness and anti-racism training compulsory, and examinable at university and college level, for all public-facing staff, including teachers, GPs, nurses, A&E staff, social workers, council officials, and prison officers.
    - Training and employing Travellers directly within frontline mental health, crisis, and local authority services, backed by public-sector employment quotas.
    - Securing dedicated political representation so Travellers have a permanent voice where laws and policies are made, alongside challenging politicians on the doorstep at every election.

Conclusion

The Galway conference demonstrated the immense value of coming together in a Traveller-Only Space to speak plainly about the past, the present, and the future. The message from the room was unmistakable: the hardships facing the Traveller community today did not happen by accident. They are the direct consequence of decades of State policies designed to assimilate Travellers and erase their way of life.

Seeking a State Apology is not about looking backward or asking for a handout; it is about demanding truth, accountability, and justice for those who endured horrific treatment, for the people struggling with trauma and exclusion today, and for the children and grandchildren to come. Travellers have survived every attempt to erase their identity because they are a resilient, determined people. By standing together, supporting one another with kindness, and building a united national campaign with clear terms and conditions, the community can compel the Irish State to acknowledge the mistreatment of Travellers and take genuine steps to repair the damage.