

**Ariel Goodbody:** Hello everyone, I'm here today with Aoife. Aoife is my girlfriend, Artoria's, girlfriend and Aoife's just generally a really cool person. Actually she said to me, oh, you know, I'd really like to be interviewed, and I jumped on the opportunity to talk to her, and I hope you'll find it really interesting as well.

So Aoife, how would you like to introduce yourself?

**Aoife Willis:** Hello, thank you for having me. I'm Aoife. I am from Ireland, and I have recently moved to London to start working for a homelessness charity because right before that I was actually homeless in Ireland. So I have come over here to follow my dream to be working in that kind of field.

**Ariel Goodbody:** Cool. So you said it's your dream. When did you first start thinking about that? I imagine being homeless, you know, gives you a lot of motivation but was there anything else?

**Aoife Willis:** No, it has been for about five or six years that I wanted to do this, and the reason it is sort of my dream, apart from wanting to help people, is because I also have an obsession with housing law, which is very, very useful when trying to help people who are having problems with their housing.

**Ariel Goodbody:** If I remember correctly you went to university to study law because of that interest?

**Aoife Willis:** I did, yeah. And I tried to get away with writing all of my essays on homelessness and human rights law as much as I could before anybody realised what was happening.

**Ariel Goodbody:** Did you find there was a lot of, like, pushback, like, negativity from other students and maybe the teachers? Because usually I feel like people who do law degrees, they just want to become a lawyer and make a lot of money, right?

**Aoife Willis:** Yeah, so people are very surprised of what I wanted to do. I got a lot of pushback because actually that is not a very well studied area of the law. Our understanding of how human rights law impacts housing and homelessness is very weak because it's a very specialist area of study.

But I found that very interesting because it means that I can come in and be treated as the expert straight away, because I'm the only person that's ever went out of their way in Northern Ireland to study this in real depth.

**Ariel Goodbody:** So can you maybe give an example of how this law gets really complicated with regards to housing and human rights?

**Aoife Willis:** Yeah, so the main thing that I've studied that I find extremely complicated is the idea of what a home is in the law.

So we might think of a home legally as a property that you occupy, that you have a legal right to be there. But the situation under human rights law is very complicated because your home is more abstract and you can have protections under human rights law in relation to your home even if you've never had a legal right to be there.

As long as whoever has a legal right to it knows that you're there and didn't do anything about it, it can be classified as your home. These things can get very complicated and difficult in a court of law.

**Ariel Goodbody:** Right. So I guess the form of that that most people would be familiar with is squatting, which I'll just explain the meaning. So 'squat' literally means to kind of stand very low to the ground. You're almost sitting down.

But we also use it to mean occupying a building where nobody is living. So, you know, often there's apartments or old office or school buildings where nobody is living. So squatters are people who come and live in those spaces. Normally we think of it as illegal, but of course there are, like you just said, protections. So do you have anything to add about that?

**Aoife Willis:** Yes. Squatting is very important and it is a big part of the law around how we define a home. But really the biggest one is caravan sites, because normally people that are illegally occupying a caravan site are occupying land that is owned by the government.

And so the person trying to evict them is also the government. And so they have certain responsibilities under human rights law directly to people occupying the land. So most of the case law is around people from nomadic cultures occupying caravan sites illegally, and eventually getting asked to leave in a way that is insensitive to their culture, or that causes them severe hardship after there.

**Ariel Goodbody:** So I'll just explain for listeners outside of Europe: we usually use the general term 'travellers' to refer to various nomadic groups which have

existed in Europe, and I think actually other parts of the world, for a very long time. And the biggest group, if I understand correctly, is Roma. Is that correct?

**Aoife Willis:** In certain parts of Europe, yes. Mistreatment of Roma people is probably where most of this law comes from, so it's most of what I think about. The definition of these groups is very difficult, though, and something I'm not really best suited to do.

I think really one of the unfortunate side effects of these court cases that I've been quoting is that governments, including the UK government, are much quicker to move people on from these sites, because the longer you're there and the more roots that you put down in forming a community in a certain site, the easier it is under human rights law to claim that this is your home, and that you have certain rights and protections that can't be infringed by the government.

So we now do have very kind of strict local government rules about where you can and cannot place a caravan. So that really reflects quite negative attitudes towards people that are vulnerable to mistreatment for all sorts of various reasons.

And it's just really an example of how, marginalised groups are made to be at risk of homelessness because of government policy.

**Ariel Goodbody:** I'll just clarify the term 'marginalised groups' because I know maybe not everyone knows it. Marginalised groups are people who are pushed to the margins, the edges of society. So that's often LGBTQ+ people, ethnic minorities, poor people, disabled people and so on. If I can ask, when you experienced homelessness, was that in Northern Ireland?

**Aoife Willis:** Yeah, so two times. So once in Northern Ireland and once in Scotland as well.

**Ariel Goodbody:** Right. And moving to London – if people don't know the housing situation in London is very difficult. It's extremely expensive. I think it's one of the most expensive cities in the world. How have you found the differences in housing and, I guess like, attitudes towards housing?

**Aoife Willis:** I suppose the real thing that is a huge difference between other parts of the UK and Ireland and London in terms of housing is that there is a sense of desperation around housing. So if you're looking for somewhere to live, you feel that you are in a very weak position because there's so little to go around. And there's more and more people coming to the capital every year. We

use a term called 'housing crisis' and it's very evident in London that there is a housing crisis.

I'm very lucky that I was able to find somewhere to live once I got my job, but I know obviously from personal experience that it can take people a long time to find somewhere to live, let alone somewhere where they can feel at home and where they can feel that they are part of a community in London. People are being forced out of their homes and their areas due to rising rents.

So there's really a sense in London of people being moved around by the housing market and being at the mercy of rising prices and dwindling rental stock.

**Ariel Goodbody:** Some people might have heard of the Grenfell Tower incident where a really big block of flats burned down in London because it wasn't built safely. And I know that a lot of the families from there, for a really long time, they were in temporary housing and then they were given housing halfway across the country, which – it was ridiculous.

When you, you live in a community, you know, people that you know, it's not fair to expect people to just completely change where they live.

**Aoife Willis:** Absolutely, and I think really some of these things that we're thinking about apply mostly to types of housing that are owned by the government.

So the term that we have in the UK is social housing. Really, there's now an awareness after Grenfell that social housing is very unsafe. It can be overcrowded. It's in very poor condition. and as you said, people are getting moved halfway across the country because there just isn't enough of it to go around.

I think that people that don't work in the sector might not be aware that it is a serious crisis and it's only getting worse, and it's been getting worse for decades with no end in sight.

**Ariel Goodbody:** So the charity you work for – is part of the job, like, pushing to get more houses built, pushing to have more social housing? Um, because I know you also deal with people who are currently homeless and trying to get them housed. So, kind of, how does the work break down between those things?

**Aoife Willis:** Well, really, across the charity and across our sector there are various ways that we are trying to improve things. So the work that I do is about supporting people directly. So going out to people either that are street homeless at the moment, working with them to help them address some of their problems, working with them to navigate government systems to get themselves housed.

But also of course there are people that work in roles that are more research and policy focused, so that is more about speaking to government agencies and doing research and increasing our understanding of homelessness to try to get policies changed, mostly to push for more social housing to be built, ultimately, and for fair distribution of social housing that exists.

I think the important thing is that all these strands are working together and that we're kind of working across society as well and taking influence from the people that are actually experiencing these issues first-hand and making sure that we are advocating for their rights and the changes that they want to see.

**Ariel Goodbody:** And what kind of changes are those? I mean, obviously more social housing, but are there more specific things that maybe people wouldn't expect?

**Aoife Willis:** Yes, so the really the big thing, and it's not necessarily a policy change, but it's more a cultural change, is for greater understanding of why people are homeless, and for a greater awareness of how people are treated when they're experiencing homelessness.

So the main issue that people raise time and time again is about being mistreated, both by the government and by the people that traditionally should be helping them. And this is because people don't really understand why someone can end up being homeless. And we have a very outdated view of why this is.

And really it's based on this attitude that it's somehow somebody's fault if they become homeless. That it's somehow to do with a sort of character failing. Also there's a kind of stereotype that people that are homeless or at risk of homelessness are difficult to work with.

And I think the important thing to just bear in mind is that most people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness have experienced trauma in their lives. and that they may be difficult to work with but that we need to find a way to do it and we need to be working with them to find that way.

I think that people would benefit from a greater understanding of how people become homeless. And I think that the main thing that people don't know is that one of the main drivers of homelessness generally is relationship breakdown. So whether that is with your family or with your partner... Particularly we know that LGBT young people make up a very high proportion of homeless young people.

And that speaks to the fact that this is a group of people that are more likely to experience relationship breakdown with their family because they're rejected. These issues can be related to really long term complex mental health and societal issues that kind of feed into this very complex experience of homelessness.

And so we need to have a more nuanced view of individuals and what has led them to this position so that we can start to ask ourselves, what can we actually do to work with them to improve their lives?

**Ariel Goodbody:** Thank you for sharing that. That's really, really interesting.

Uh, let's move on to, I guess, a bit of a lighter topic! So I'll just briefly explain because the situation with the way the UK is split up is quite complicated, right?

The United Kingdom is technically split up into four countries. England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. But Northern Ireland is only part of the island of Ireland, which I know is confusing because 'island' and 'Ireland' sound very similar. And the other part is the Republic of Ireland, which is a separate country, still in the European Union.

So, I'm sure for a lot of people outside the UK, they maybe don't really understand, what's the difference, I guess, in terms of culture and experience between Northern Ireland and the Republic and, I don't know, whatever you think is interesting in that regard.

**Aoife Willis:** Yeah, so this is something I think about quite a lot since I've moved over here from Northern Ireland, where I'm from, because on the surface, Northern Ireland looks very similar to other parts of the UK, but there are a few really big differences.

I think the main one is the fact that, although it looks similar now to the rest of the UK, one generation ago it was very different, Ireland as a whole has moved out of poverty really only in my parents' generation, and the impact of that is massive, in both small and big ways.

So a small way is that about 15 years ago, people started to get disposable income, really, for the first time in some social groups.

**Ariel Goodbody:** I'll just quickly explain: disposable income is when you have more money from work than you need for, you know, essentials like food and housing. So you can use disposable income on, you know, leisure, nice things, basically.

**Aoife Willis:** And because they were really the first generation in Ireland to have this disposable income, they decided to splash out with that money and they decided to buy things for their children.

So in the early 2000s, there was this very strange period where every house in Ireland had a trampoline. That is one way that the attitudes to wealth are slightly different.

The bigger way is that in England, where I live, having money is more celebrated, and it's more seen as a simple, positive thing, whereas in Ireland, people feel happy for you, but they also judge you a bit for having money.

So the attitude is really like, oh, he's doing pretty well, good for him. What a, what a bad man.

I think the main one as well, though, that doesn't get talked about a lot and people over here in England wouldn't recognize is that Ireland is very like England culturally in a lot of ways, except for people in Ireland really believe in ghosts a lot more than people in England. They really do.

And the way I've described it is: it's not that they believe in ghosts, but that they strongly believe their uncle has seen a ghost.

**Ariel Goodbody:** Have you seen a ghost?

**Aoife Willis:** I haven't seen a ghost. I could ask if my uncle has seen a ghost.

**Ariel Goodbody:** So, in case people don't know, Ireland has its own indigenous language, Irish, which is a Celtic language. We talked a bit about Celtic languages also when I was talking with Artoria on a previous bonus episode. But these days, the majority of people speak just English.

My dad is actually Irish, he grew up in the Republic of Ireland, and he remembers like a few phrases from school, but that's it. What was your experience with Irish growing up?

**Aoife Willis:** Well... I'll need to give some explanation, and although Ariel has said that the Ireland section would be the lighter section, it's not the nicest explanation, because where I'm from in the north of Ireland, our schools are segregated into Catholic and Protestant schools, So the way that language is handled in that situation is that Irish Gaelic is only taught in the Catholic schools and only English is taught in the British Protestant schools.

**Ariel Goodbody:** So if people weren't that familiar with Irish history, is it fair to say that generally the Catholic parts of Ireland tend to be more positive about the idea of a unified Ireland and then the Protestant parts are much more loyal to the United Kingdom?

**Aoife Willis:** Generally, although things are changing now and becoming more complex, that is generally the situation.

**Ariel Goodbody:** It's really crazy. I remember my mum told me a story. So my brother's name is Brendan. So Brendan is a Catholic name. And years ago when my brother was still very young and I wasn't born, they went to, I think it was a, it was in Northern Ireland, to visit relatives and my brother ran down the street and my mum called 'Brendan!' and apparently everyone just turned and looked at her.

So, um, I'm guessing it was a Protestant area! Um, so yeah, things have changed a lot in a very short period of time, but there's still a lot of tension. Is that fair to say?

**Aoife Willis:** Yes, that's definitely true. But things have very much changed for my generation.

**Ariel Goodbody:** Earlier Aoife said she wanted to like, talk about some dialectal phrases in Irish English. What words are your favourite, let's say?

**Aoife Willis:** Well, there are a few words that have struck me as very, uh, funny in Irish-influenced English speaking, and I think the real difference is that it's a lot more informal. And so a lot of the words that we have are essentially slang words.



There's one I like a lot where you're describing something as very bad. You describe it as 'ojus bad', which is a short way of saying 'odious', which is a quite old term to mean essentially bad, like hateful. Yeah. Which is quite a – just used in a very casual way to say, oh, it's ojus bad weather, which I really like.

There's another one that is said quite a lot in the north of Ireland where we say 'scundered', which means embarrassed, but the way you say it is really like an insult, so you will say something to someone and then say, I'm absolutely scundered for you.

**Ariel Goodbody:** Your accent has changed quite a bit since you've left Northern Ireland. I mean, you've also lived in Scotland. So, yeah, how have you experienced that actually? Do people recognise you as Irish from your accent?

**Aoife Willis:** Sometimes. I find that my accent changes depending on whether or not I'm speaking to another Irish person, so then I will become very Irish.

I think a lot of people moving from Ireland to England adopt a sort of American accent, which I have done accidentally as well, as you may be able to tell.

**Ariel Goodbody:** Awesome. It's been super cool to talk to you and really educational. Do you have anything you want to add at the end?

**Aoife Willis:** No, just that I'm very happy to be here.

**Ariel Goodbody:** Well, thank you so much for being interviewed, and if you have comments about this episode, you can email me at [Ariel@EasyStoriesInEnglish.com](mailto:Ariel@EasyStoriesInEnglish.com).

If you would like me to talk to Aoife again and have any specific questions you want me to ask, just let me know. Alright then, thanks Aoife, and have a good day.

**Aoife Willis:** Thank you very much.