

Meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government on 5 December 2019

Opening Statement of Damien English, TD, Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government

Introduction

I thank the Chair and members of the Committee for the opportunity to appear again before the Committee, to give you an update on the Traveller Accommodation Expert Review report and the progress made towards considering and implementing the recommendations contained in the report, which has been published on my Department's website. Addressing Traveller Accommodation is a priority for me and for my Department.

As the Committee are aware the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 provides that local authorities have statutory responsibility for the assessment of the accommodation needs of Travellers and the preparation, adoption and implementation of multi-annual Traveller Accommodation Programmes (TAPs) in their areas. My Department's role is to ensure that there are adequate structures and supports in place to assist the authorities in providing such accommodation, including a national framework of policy, legislation and funding.

The challenges encountered in the delivery of Traveller accommodation have been widely acknowledged by Traveller representatives, local authorities and government departments, the EU and the UN. The completion of this review and the delivery of this report is a significant step in identifying the best ways to address these challenges.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the members of the Expert Group Mr. David Joyce, Professor Michelle Norris, and Dr. Conor Norton for their participation in the Traveller Accommodation Expert Group and to acknowledge the time, expertise and commitment that they dedicated to the review. I would also like to thank them for delivering the subsequent report and recommendations.

As the Committee are aware, a dedicated capital budget is in place to fund the delivery of Traveller-specific accommodation such as Group Housing and Halting Sites for Traveller families. The budget also provides funding for renovation and refurbishment work to improve the standard of existing accommodation. The budget available for Traveller specific accommodation in 2019 is €13m, this is being increased to €14.5m for 2020. My priority is to ensure that full use is made of the increasing level of funding available for investment in Traveller accommodation.

It is important to note that, accommodation for Traveller households is provided across a range of housing options, including standard local authority housing, private housing assisted by local authority or voluntary bodies and private rented accommodation, as well as Traveller-specific accommodation. Travellers may express a preference across the range of accommodation types at any stage when applying for social housing supports through the Social Housing Needs Assessment process. This process provides additional accommodation options to Traveller families to meet their culturally appropriate needs such as halting site bays and Traveller group housing.

There is little doubt that delivery on capital programmes in recent years has been disappointing and I am determined to address the reasons for this and implement solutions.

Expert Group Recommendations

The 32 recommendations made by the Expert Group to accelerate the delivery of Traveller accommodation are comprehensive and wide ranging, and include proposals aimed at:

- addressing research deficiencies, including how information is gathered and used;
- removing any potential delays and obstacles in the planning system in terms of delivery;
- increasing resources and delivery capacity; and
- strengthening governance arrangements.

In the context of the 32 recommendations, my Department is now liaising with key stakeholders on issues arising. It should be noted that the Expert Group's report has also been shared with the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee (NTACC) and members of the Committee are considering the report. Members of the NTACC have provided submissions to my Department which are also being considered. All further submissions from the NTACC and other interested parties including other government departments will be considered.

Progress and Implementation of the Recommendations

My Department have already been able to progress a small number of short term recommendations, for example a review has been concluded of the arrangements for disbursing funding for the provision and refurbishment of Traveller specific

accommodation and a new process is proposed which we aim to have in place by the start of next year (Capacity recommendation 2).

However, due to the number of stakeholders, input required and wide ranging impacts of most of the recommendations in the report my Department will set up a programme of projects to progress agreed recommendations. In order to determine how each item will be progressed we have adopted the following phased approach to the implementation:

Phase 1: Information Gathering

My Department is currently in the information gathering phase. Stakeholders have been given the opportunity to provide their comments on the report and input has been requested from other Departments. Submissions have been received from:

- the CCMA,
- AILG,
- CENA (the Traveller AHB),
- Wexford County Council and
- The Department of Justice.

A brief joint submission was also received from the three Traveller organisations represented on the NTACC, (the Irish Traveller Movement (ITM), Pavee Point and the National Traveller Women's Forum (NTWFM)). These groups have indicated that they will provide a more detailed joint submission shortly.

The recommendations have been subdivided to allow my Department to form subject matter expert groups and group by actions required. These working groups have been set up to carefully consider all submissions and determine how best to progress the recommendations. For example, a number of recommendations involve the review and amendment of the Social Housing Needs Assessment. Officials from the Policy Division and the Traveller Accommodation Support Unit in the Department have met to discuss this matter and will shortly be providing me with a submission in relation to this.

Separately, groups have been set up to consider the Planning recommendations. The Department have grouped the first three Planning recommendations together as these all involve changes to how a proposal for Traveller accommodation moves through the approval process. A separate group has been set up to look at aligning the TAPs with the local area development plans.

Phase 2: Pre Project

The Department will shortly begin work on the Pre Project phase which will enable the project to move forward to the Implementation phase.

In this phase, a programme board will be set up and will have responsibility for agreeing which projects to take forward, the scope and timeframe of the projects and for overseeing the programme as the projects progress.

I will sit on the programme board as will the NTACC and a senior official from my Department.

In this phase a programme manager will also be assigned. The programme manager will be responsible for centrally tracking the progress on all projects and reporting back to the programme board.

High level project briefs will also be prepared in this phase which my Department will then act on.

Phase 3 Project Initiation

In the initiation phase project teams will be formed, including the selection of project managers. The project initiation documents including the detailed project plans will be completed. This phase will take place early in 2020.

The Committee can be assured that this Government are committed to accelerating and increasing the delivery of much needed Traveller accommodation and the funding is in place to support this delivery. The recommendations in this report provide valuable guidance on how this may be achieved.