

Opening statement to Joint Committee on key issues affecting the Traveller Community

Jim Walsh, principal officer, Drugs Policy and Social Inclusion Unit, Department of Health

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Joint Committee. I am the principal officer with responsibility for coordinating policy on health services for Travellers in the Department of Health.

The starting point for updating the committee on the health status of Travellers is the All Ireland Traveller Health Study:

- Life expectancy is between 11 and 15 years lower than for the general population
- Mortality rates for cancer, cardiovascular disease and other causes are significantly higher for Travellers
- The infant mortality rate for Traveller children is 3.6 times the rate for the general population.

In sum, Travellers die younger, have more illnesses, and are at greater risk of substance misuse and mental ill-health. The All Ireland Traveller Health Study highlights that these health inequalities are rooted in the social determinants of health, which encompass accommodation, education, employment and discrimination.

The Department of Health provides funding in the region of €10m a year to the HSE for initiatives targeted at improving health outcomes for the Traveller community. A further €500,000 funding is provided through the Dormant Accounts Fund. I am aware that the HSE will attend the committee at a later date, so I will not go into detail on the HSE initiatives.

I will outline examples of health policy initiatives at national level that support the Traveller community, and that illustrate some of the challenges in meeting the health needs of Travellers.

Ageing is a key issue for Traveller health, as Travellers die younger than the general population. As a result, just 3 per cent of Travellers were aged 65 years or older, compared to 13 per cent of the general population.

A particular issue in addressing positive ageing for Travellers is lack of disaggregated data on ethnic status which is required to monitor and address the health needs of Travellers. To address this deficit, the Healthy and Positive Ageing Initiative developed a bespoke set of 14 indicators of positive ageing for Travellers, which was published in May this year, following consultation with members of the Travelling community. This reflects a commitment in the national positive ageing strategy to change mindsets to promote social inclusion and to pay particular attention to the needs of marginalised groups.

The use and misuse of drugs and alcohol is an important concern for the Traveller population, due to poor living conditions and high unemployment. Over 300 Travellers were treated for problem drug use in 2017, which represents 3.7 per cent of all those attending for treatment (though 0.7 per cent of total population). One of the actions in the national drug strategy, *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery*, is to improve access to addiction services for people who use drugs from the Traveller community. There are particular challenges in engaging Travellers in drug services, which arise from the stigma associated with drug use in the Traveller community, especially among males.

Lifestyle issues, such as physical activity, diet, alcohol consumption and smoking, are all factors that impact on Traveller health. These issues do not occur in isolation, but reflect the low socio-economic status of Travellers in society and hence, the social determinants of health. Healthy Ireland is the Government-led initiative to improve the health and wellbeing of everyone living in Ireland. It seeks to address the social, environmental and commercial determinants of health which adversely impact on health outcomes, giving rise to health inequalities and creating barriers for people and communities to enjoy optimal health.

The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) is the Government policy framework for addressing the health and other needs of Travellers. It contains over 30 health-related actions across four themes. The Dept of Health and the HSE are represented on the steering committee for NTRIS and report on a regular basis on the various health actions.

A key health action in NTRIS (#73) is to develop and implement a detailed action plan to address the specific health needs of Travellers, using a social determinants approach. The lead role in developing the action plan rests with the HSE, in conjunction with Traveller organisations. A draft plan has been circulated to stakeholders by the HSE and further work is ongoing to finalise it by the end of 2019.

The Minister of Health, Simon Harris TD, and the Minister of State with responsibility for inclusion health, Catherine Byrne TD, are engaged with and supportive of the health action plan. The Ministers share the frustration of Traveller organisations about the protracted development of the action plan. The Department is committed to providing the leadership and resources to support the implementation of the Traveller health action plan.

The Dept is developing an inclusion health policy to address the extreme health inequalities experienced by Travellers and other socially excluded groups. The aim is to deliver on a core objective of the Sláintecare reform programme for the health services: an integrated model of care for people with complex needs.

The Department is committed to ongoing engagement with Traveller organisations on Traveller health issues. In 2018, my unit convened a workshop on Traveller health, which brought together relevant units across the Department, the HSE and Traveller organisations. There are many examples of Department of Health structures with Traveller representation.

In line with action #74 in NTRIS, the Department and the HSE will review the arrangements for engagement with Traveller organisations to support the Traveller health action plan.

To conclude, the Department of Health is committed to improving the health status of Travellers. However, many of levers to achieve this objective lie outside the remit of the Dept of Health. The Department will continue to engage with the NTRIS steering committee and Traveller organisations to improve health services for Travellers and to address the social determinants of their health.

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