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Special Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community

Opening Statement on health to Special Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community on the 22nd of October 2019

The National Traveller Women's Forum is the National Network of Traveller women and Traveller women's organisations from throughout Ireland. While we do welcome this opportunity to speak to the Special Joint Committee on key health issues affecting the Traveller Community it is the latest in a long line of spaces policy or other which Travellers and Traveller organisations have engaged in to bring about equal outcomes from health. This is not new information and it should definitely not be this difficult to have our communities issues heard and acted upon. In our written submission we have raised many issues and put forward recommendations but for today I just want to emphasise one issue and that is that.

The current National health structures and the very limited policy Implementation which has taken place for the Advancement of Traveller Women's Health have failed to have any meaningful long term impact over all.

Achievements have been made locally and regionally by Travellers, Traveller organisations and primary health care projects and also by individual health care and HSE professionals but while the Department of Health continue to behave like absentee landlords ignoring the need for structural and institutional changes that are needed in the health services thinking and their practice we will progress no further.

As our submission points out the studies/research has been done and the findings are stark and

shocking. Yet there has been no targeted strategy or action plan put in place to address the health inequalities for Travellers since the Traveller Health Strategy 2002-2005 and the National Intercultural Strategy 2007-2012. Health issues for Travellers have been excluded entirely from all mainstream health-related strategies including the current Healthy Ireland Framework. The only direction that the Department of Health appears to want to go down is to pigeonhole all matters concerning Traveller health into social inclusion. This is not the answer and again the question has to be asked how long more we have to wait for the Department of Health to meet their own policy commitments to Travellers.

Nine years after the launch of the All Ireland Traveller Health Study in 2010 there is still no government department lead and there are no personnel with a brief on Traveller policy within the Department of Health. Also it has been more than two years since a commitment was made to develop and implement a detailed National Traveller Health Action Plan, based on the findings from this study using a social determinants approach. Yet Travellers continue to die from cancer, heart disease and other preventable conditions including death by suicide in greater numbers than the majority population. Of course we can't demonstrate that with hard data because there is still no disaggregated data collection across all health systems in Ireland. Regional Traveller Health Units (THUs) are under-resourced and their funding has not been ring-fenced for Traveller health. Despite underspends in Traveller health budgets the HSE in some regions made cuts to key services for Travellers under cost saving measures (reducing hours of Traveller Community Health Workers and other supports). In one region the Traveller Health Unit has not met despite efforts by Traveller groups in the area to make it happen. There needs to be more accountability and transparency within the health system in relation to Traveller health budgets. In addition to this the National Traveller Health Advisory Committee which was the driver behind the All Ireland Traveller Health Study has not been convened since

2012 despite repeated calls by Traveller organisations.

In 2017 we saw the launch of the National Traveller Roma Inclusion Strategy with a range of actions on health and as I have said already we are still waiting the long promised National Traveller Health Action Plan from the Department of Health. Another commitment was also made by the Department of Health to review and improve existing arrangements for engagement between Traveller organisations the HSE and the Department of Health. In May 2018 the Department of Health the HSE and Traveller organisations participated in a workshop where our views were made very clear on our position around a number of issues including

- Effective monitoring and implementation of Traveller health policy
- The need for an institutional mechanism representative of all stakeholders to drive that implementation.
- Dedicated resources – financial and personnel.

These issues and others are continually being raised by all stakeholders with little response from Department of Health. A draft of the National Traveller Health Action Plan was circulated for feedback in March 2019. The draft document was inadequate and again demonstrated the lack of attention and commitment that the Department of Health is giving to addressing the health inequalities for Travellers.

Again the repeated ask is that the Department of Health urgently address the issues we have raised today by finalising and more importantly implementing a holistic and gender responsive National Traveller Health Action Plan which will deliver real change in health outcomes for Travellers. An independent implementation body needs to be established with ring-fenced budgets to drive delivery and implementation. Many more recommendations can be found in our submission.