

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Traveller Expert Group

12th October, 2021 - Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Opening Statement from Minister Peter Burke

Introduction

Chair, Members, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to address this Joint Committee on the matter of the Traveller Expert Group – Review of Traveller Accommodation. I am joined by two officials from my Department, Paul Benson, Principal Officer and Ann Gill Assistant Principal Officer.

Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998 and Traveller Accommodation Provision

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 in order to meet the identified accommodation need.

The Departments role is to ensure that there are adequate structures and supports in place to assist the local authorities and approved housing bodies in providing such accommodation, including a national framework of policy, legislation and funding. It is a matter for each local authority to set targets for the provision of Traveller accommodation, which they outline in their Traveller Accommodation Programmes. These programmes provide a road map for local authority investment priorities over the plan period and form the basis for the allocation of funding from the Department for Traveller accommodation. Current TAPs run for the period 2019-2024 and are up for mid-term reviews at the end of this year

Annual Local Authority Estimate of Traveller Households

An annual count/estimate of Traveller households is carried out by local authorities every November. The most recent audited Estimate for 2020 indicates that there were approximately 10,809 Traveller households in the State, 78% of whom live in standard accommodation and 22% of whom live in Traveller Specific accommodation

The 78% in standard accommodation includes:-

- 45 % in local authority or approved housing body tenancies
- 18% in supported tenancies in the private rental sector
- 9% in shared housing
- 6% in accommodation provided by Travellers from their own resources

The 22% in Traveller specific accommodation includes:-

- 8% within group housing schemes
- 9% on authorised halting sites and
- 5% on unauthorised halting sites

Annual Spending on Traveller Accommodation

There is no doubt that delivery on Traveller specific accommodation has been disappointing in recent years and this is reflected in the levels of funding drawn down. I am pleased however to report that local authorities made full use of the €14.5 million which was available for Traveller-specific accommodation in 2020 and it is hoped that this will be repeated with the €15.5m budget for 2021.

It is important to note however that accommodation for Traveller households is provided across a range of housing options. The majority of Travellers live in standard housing, including local authority and AHB housing and HAP/RAS supported tenancies in the private rented sector. Funding for these housing

supports are provided through the respective budget lines. The Traveller Accommodation Unit's budget is provided solely for Traveller-specific accommodation, such as halting sites and group housing schemes. Accordingly, funding available for and spent on the provision of accommodation solutions for Travellers is much broader than the often reported spend under the Traveller Specific Accommodation budget.

The Department continues to work with all our stakeholders to improve the delivery and standard of all types of Traveller accommodation and this will continue.

OCO Report

The recent publication by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children has shone a spotlight on the unacceptable conditions on the halting site which was the subject of the Ombudsman's investigation. Whilst the conditions on this site are not true of halting sites in general, as there are many examples of well designed, managed and maintained sites across the country, it is equally true to say that it is not unique. This cannot be accepted.

Prior to the publication of the Ombudsman's report, my Department had embarked on a series of monthly meetings with the relevant local authority to discuss the options and supports required to deal with the challenges on the site. These meetings continue and will support progress being made on the recommendations contained within the OCO report.

- To date my Department has recouped funding of c.€700,000 to the relevant local authority to carry out essential maintenance works on the site.
- In April 2020, my Department approved funding of €5.4m for the development of the adjoining site for a traveller specific accommodation development
- In June this year, I met with the Chief Executive and senior management of the Local Authority and asked them to outline their plans to address the issues raised in the report. I also met with families on site to hear their views.

- My Department has recently
 - supported the employment of a mediator by the relevant local authority to establish baseline data in relation to the site, its occupants and their accommodation requests.
 - is providing support to the local authority to complete a full health and safety audit of each bay on the site to identify what works are required and
 - has confirmed to the local authority that funding will not be an obstacle to making progress
 - continues to meet with the local authority on a monthly basis to receive progress reports

Traveller Accommodation Expert Review

The Traveller Accommodation Expert Group was established by my Department in 2018 to review the Traveller Accommodation Act, 1998 and other legislation impacting on the provision and delivery of accommodation for Travellers. The Expert group presented its report in July 2019. The report sets out an integrated set of recommendations intended to improve the effectiveness of the arrangements for providing accommodation for members of the Traveller community. These recommendations address four key themes:

- delivery reflecting need
- planning
- capacity and resources
- governance

Earlier this year I established a Programme Board to oversee implementation of recommendations of the Expert Group.

The Programme Board includes two Traveller representatives, two County and City Management Association (CCMA) representatives, two representatives from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and is chaired by the Chair of the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee

(NTACC). I attend quarterly meetings of the Programme Board to hear updates on progress and the Board also updates the NTACC on progress.

The programme board has put in place a work programme for 2021 which covers 18 of the 32 recommendations and these are being worked on by officials in my Department with the help and support of various stakeholders.

The following are some of the recommendations which have been advanced to completion or are currently being advanced:

- **Funding Allocation System** - In 2020, to facilitate ease of access to funding the Department ceased allocating specific budgets to individual local authorities. Instead, it is open to all local authorities to apply for and drawdown funds at any time throughout the year and this is actively encouraged by the Department.
- **CSO Data** - The Department has liaised with the CSO in relation to the upcoming census to ensure that all Travellers are facilitated to participate in Census 2022.
- **Traveller Identifier** - Regulations are to be implemented shortly to provide for a Traveller identifier on the Social Housing Support application form. This will allow for evidenced based planning for Traveller accommodation and will support the Traveller Accommodation Programmes. (TAPs).
- **Management and Maintenance of Traveller Specific Accommodation** - A 50% increase in funding for the Management and Maintenance of halting sites and group housing schemes was approved by me earlier this year.
- **Design of Traveller Specific Accommodation** - Research is being commissioned to consider the design and long term maintenance of Traveller specific accommodation. This will involve wide stakeholder engagement and consultation and ultimately result in updated guidance for LAs and AHBs in the design of Traveller-specific accommodation.
- **Transient Sites** - As part of the work of the Programme Board the Department will be exploring the provision of an all -island approach to the provision of a network of Transient Sites across the island of Ireland

and discussions in this regard have begun with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

- **Reporting on Provision of new Traveller Specific Accommodation** – Delivery of new Traveller-specific accommodation such as permanent halting sites and group housing schemes will be tracked under Housing for All and reported in progress reports against the 50,000 new build social housing targets.
- **Link between Local Authority Development and Traveller Accommodation Plans** – The Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) has been working with my officials on this issue and has just completed and published a Case Study Paper on ‘Development Plans and Traveller Accommodation’ which will help inform work in this area.

Other recommendations being worked on currently include;

- Social housing assessment Regulations
- Transfer policy from HAP/RAS to Traveller Specific Accommodation
- Use of local authority emergency powers
- Part 8 planning consent process for local authority own developments
- Trespass Legislation

Independent Review of the Role of Social Workers and Personnel Employed by Local Authorities Specifically to Assist Travellers with their Accommodation Needs

To ensure that services relating to Traveller accommodation needs adapt and remain relevant, the Department commissioned research into the role of Social Workers and Personnel employed by local authorities to assist Travellers with their accommodation needs.

Since the mid-1960s, local authorities have employed social workers to support Travellers in meeting their accommodation needs. Since then, the nature and scale of the demands on local authority housing departments have changed and local authorities have taken on new housing responsibilities. The Department are liaising with the CCMA on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the report.

Pilot Caravan Loan Scheme

To ensure that Traveller households have access to good quality caravan/trailer accommodation the Department, following extensive consultation with stakeholders and following approval from DPER has rolled out a 6 month pilot preferential Caravan Loan Scheme in 4 local authority areas. Following a review of the pilot, which it is hoped will be successful, the intention would be to roll it out nationally during 2022, incorporating whatever changes are deemed necessary arising from the review. The scheme has the potential to significantly improve living conditions for Traveller families and will be fully supported by the Department.

Housing for All

‘Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland’ is the Government’s housing plan to 2030 and was launched earlier this month. It is a multi-annual, multi-billion euro plan which will improve Ireland’s housing system and deliver more homes of all types for people with different housing needs. €4 billion in capital is to be invested annually on social and affordable housing. This is the biggest such programme in the history of the State.

The Housing for All plan specifically recognises the importance of addressing Traveller accommodation needs as a priority and commits to working with local authorities to improve the quantity and quality of Traveller-specific accommodation, fund the ambition of local authority Traveller Accommodation Plans and grow the Traveller-specific accommodation pipeline.

Thanks you Chair. I am happy to take the members questions.

