



Cumann Lucht Bainistíochta Contae agus Cathrach
County and City Management Association

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Opening Statement by Mr Eugene Cummins, Chief
Executive Roscommon County Council, representing the
County and City Management Association

In relation to discussions on the Traveller Expert Group – Review of Traveller
Accommodation.

12th October 2021

Chair, Members of the Committee, my name is Eugene Cummins, I am a member of the County and City Management Association Committee on Housing, Building and Land Use, and I am also Chief Executive of Roscommon County Council. I am accompanied here today by my colleague Ms Catherine Keenan, Director of Service Dun Laoghaire, Rathdown County Council and Mr Maurice Manning, Director of Service, Cork County Council.

Firstly, on behalf of the CCMA I would like to thank the committee for its invitation here today and look forward to assisting the committee in its deliberations on the Review of Traveller Accommodation by the Expert Group.

The CCMA welcomes the reference to the implementation of the recommendations of the Expert Review Group in “Housing for All” and recognises that Traveller accommodation is a priority that needs to be addressed.

Local Authorities are governed by the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998 and do have general responsibility for the provision of housing for adults who cannot afford to provide it for themselves including the provision of Traveller accommodation at local level. This is done through the adoption and implementation of 5-year Traveller Accommodation Programmes (TAPs). Each November, Local Authorities undertake the “Annual Estimate of Accommodation of Travellers” which assists in drawing up these TAPs.

The Traveller Accommodation Expert Review Group was established in 2018 to review the Traveller Accommodation Act, 1998 and other legislation that impacts on the provision and delivery of accommodation for Travellers. In advance of the finalisation of the report, the CCMA met and discussed the role of Local Government with the Expert Group. The report, which was published in July 2019, has 32 recommendations that can be broken down into four categories, namely:

- Delivery Reflecting Need
- Planning



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- Capacity and Funding
- Governance.

The CCMA broadly welcomes the report and is represented on the Programme Board established to drive the delivery of the recommendations of the report. The Programme Board has met a number of times since its establishment and has agreed a work programme for 2021. The CCMA is committed to ensuring that these recommendations are prioritised and through the programme board will drive the priority projects currently being advanced namely:

- **CSO Data:** The CCMA welcomes the current engagement by the DHLGH and the CSO in relation to providing better representation of the Traveller community from census 2022. While this will inform policy, consideration will need to be given to research that has been carried out by other groups locally and nationally. The CCMA further agrees that a nationwide survey of Traveller demographics is important and that this could be performed by Local Authority staff in addition to, or in place of, the annual count. The CCMA believes that Local Authorities are best placed to provide this information, given their local knowledge of Traveller families which enables more accurate reporting than could be provided by an independent body.
- **Traveller Identifier:** The CCMA welcomes and supports the recommendation to formally record ethnicity in relation to housing applications going forward. This will help to identify the housing needs of Travellers and assist Local Authorities to collate data on waiting lists relating to housing support and the types of accommodation sought. It should be noted that Local Authorities are currently only detailing information on social housing tenants and social housing applicants where ethnicity has been declared, by them, as being members of the Traveller Community. It should be highlighted that it is incumbent on the applicant if he/she wants to identify themselves as a Traveller. In the absence of any such declaration, Local Authorities are not classifying any person as being a member of the Traveller community. The CCMA believes that in order to implement an ethnic identifier, a whole of Government approach is required as this complex issue stretches across many strategies and Government Departments.



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- **Funding allocation Scheme:** The removal of the allocation of specific budgets to individual Local Authorities is a welcome development. This has enabled Local Authorities to apply and draw down funds at any time during the year.
- **Management and Maintenance of Traveller Specific Accommodation:** The 50% increase in funding announced by Minister Burke for the management and maintenance of Traveller specific accommodation earlier this year was welcomed by the CCMA. This allows Local Authorities to better utilise funding. It should be noted that increasingly, greater expenditure from the maintenance budgets is being used to clean up increased levels of dumping on all sites. With regard to management of Traveller Specific Accommodation, the CCMA does not agree with the recommendation that the role of the caretaker for Traveller specific accommodation needs to be reviewed. The CCMA firmly believes that the role of the caretaker and estate manager should be kept separate as they are two very distinct roles with a potential conflict of interest. The estate manager role is currently complex and will not benefit from further responsibilities.
- **Design of Traveller Specific Accommodation:** The CCMA endorses the research on good practice – planning, design, management and maintenance of halting sites as it will inform Local Authorities on future societal changes. The CCMA has already engaged with DHLGH around the design of Traveller specific accommodation and looks forward to updated guidance for both Local authorities and AHBs in the design of Traveller Specific Accommodation.
- **Transient Sites:** The all-Ireland approach to transient sites is broadly welcomed. The CCMA would highlight that the current legislation was implemented to curb the unlawful occupation of public owned lands. The CCMA wishes to highlight that the legislation is there to protect the rights of all and repealing it is an imposition on the rights of the entire community. It should be noted that our priority is to provide suitable permanent accommodation in the first instance.

- **Reporting on provision of new Traveller specific accommodation:** The recommendation to report on the delivery of new Traveller Specific accommodation as part of the progress reporting under Housing for is welcomed.

Local Authority Role

The CCMA fully supports the progression of the projects as identified in the work programme for 2021 and is actively engaged with the NTACC and the various stakeholders. I would like to take this opportunity to provide some clarification from a Local Government perspective on some other areas identified in the report.

Local Authorities provide a range of accommodation options to the Traveller community, including Traveller specific accommodation. Accommodation is provided by Local Authorities through a range of options such as standard Local Authority or AHB housing, group housing and halting sites, and accommodation provided through subsidisation via the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS).

The option to transfer from Traveller specific accommodation to standard housing, inclusive of private rental properties is available to Travellers. Currently, Travellers can apply on both the standard housing list and Traveller specific accommodation list, availing of whichever offer comes first. They, as is the case for all applicants on the standard housing list, can then choose up to three geographical areas of preference. Tenants can specify this preference, and this would be known, recorded and monitored by the social work team. They would also make such recommendations to the relevant officer, should accommodation become available.

The CCMA notes with concern that the report fails to acknowledge that the demand for Traveller specific accommodation is diminishing, especially among the younger generations, whose preference is not to live in halting site accommodation and who are increasingly seeking standard housing and group schemes.

Challenges arising from the Report

- Where Traveller specific accommodation is proposed a significant amount of consultation with Traveller families and local communities is required to build trust, design the best housing solutions and create favourable conditions to facilitate the planning process. Such projects take additional time and significant resources. These projects are not suitable for external design teams as good communications need to be established and maintained in order to build confidence and trust with the both the Traveller families and the local communities. This is a complex area that requires significant collaboration with all stakeholders, it is not just a housing issue.
 - The CCMA believe the recommendations around Part 8 proposals could lead to serious issues locally for Local Authorities who must engage openly and transparently with communities. The CCMA recommends that expert legal advice be sought for the benefit and protection of all stakeholders.
 - The recommendation that Chief Executives use emergency powers to bypass elected members could be viewed as undermining the planning and democratic process, which underpins all aspects of Local and Central Government policy. This is an area that warrants legal opinion and careful consideration, especially in light of the potential for judicial review proceedings.
 - While there are some interesting proposals in the report, the CCMA wishes to highlight that some of the key reasons why the delivery of Traveller accommodation is problematic do not seem to be fully considered. It is important to consider the potential reasons behind objections to the development of Traveller accommodation. Traveller accommodation sites tend to be associated with increased levels of crime, violence, anti-social behaviour, illegal dumping and burning, as well as with social issues such as addition and early school. These issues need to be tackled alongside the housing issues. It should be noted as well that compatibility in the allocation of accommodation to Traveller families brings additional complexity.
- The CCMA welcomes a collaborative approach with all the relevant stakeholders to overcome some of these other obstacles.

Conclusion:

It should be highlighted that whilst complying with Government policy, the practical approach taken by each Local Authority in relation to the delivery of Traveller specific accommodation varies. This variance is necessary to reflect local circumstances and, from experience, stems from a desire to proactively look after the housing support needs of Traveller families, many of whom have vulnerabilities.

The CCMA recognises the need for greater coordination among State service providers such as the HSE. Providing more and improved Traveller-specific accommodation is also a priority locally and nationally. The CCMA welcomes the continuation of the collaborated approach by all stakeholders in recent months.

The CCMA are working with the DHLGH on the development of the Caravan loan scheme which is in pilot in four Local Authorities.

The CCMA welcomes the report of the independent review of the role of social workers. There is a need for a more sustainable funding model for the retention and expansion of the social work service and to reflect the wider role of the Social Worker both within the Housing Department and across the Local Authority in general.

The CCMA continues to work with the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee to help drive the Expert Review group recommendations.

The CCMA will endeavour to work with the Programme Board to progress actions through ongoing engagement with the CCMA Housing, Building and Land Use committee.