



## **Pavee Point Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community: Accommodation**

**1 June 2021**

### **Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre**

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre ('Pavee Point') have been working to challenge racism and promote Traveller and Roma inclusion in Ireland since 1985. The organisation works from a community development perspective and promotes the realisation of human rights and equality for Travellers and Roma in Ireland. The organisation is comprised of Travellers, Roma and members of the majority population, who work together in partnership to address the needs of Travellers and Roma as minority ethnic groups experiencing exclusion, marginalisation and racism. Working for social justice, solidarity and human rights, the central aim of Pavee Point is to contribute to improvement in the quality of life and living circumstances of Irish Travellers and Roma.

### **For further information contact:**

**Ronnie Fay, Co-Director**  
[ronnie.fay@pavee.ie](mailto:ronnie.fay@pavee.ie)  
Tel: +353 86 6073197

**Martin Collins, Co-director**  
[martin.collins@pavee.ie](mailto:martin.collins@pavee.ie)  
Tel: +353 87 9898819

Thank you Chairperson and members of the committee. We are delighted to have the opportunity to be here and welcome the Committee's focus on Traveller accommodation. We have provided a comprehensive and detailed submission which will serve as a reference document should it need it in the future. We will give a quick overview of the issues involved and leave time for discussion which will be the best use of the Committee's time.

Pavee Point wishes to highlight the critical issues regarding Traveller Accommodation: the continued failure of local authorities to meet their statutory responsibilities to provide adequate and culturally appropriate accommodation for Travellers,<sup>1</sup> including Traveller specific accommodation, and their consistent failure to draw down the budgets allocated for the provision of Traveller accommodation; the significant levels of homelessness, overcrowding, unsafe and sub-standard accommodation experienced by Travellers; the high levels of discrimination against Travellers in accessing accommodation, particularly in the private rental sector; and lack of ethnically disaggregated data to support policymaking.

Before we begin, it is important to contextualise Traveller accommodation within the broader social determinants. The current Traveller accommodation situation represents a humanitarian crisis in this country. But no one is listening. Lack of appropriate accommodation is having a significant impact on Traveller's overall health outcomes and life expectancy which is comparable to the majority population in the 1940s. It also denies Travellers equality of access and participation in education and employment, leading to poor outcomes, specifically for Traveller children, Traveller women, Travellers with disabilities and older Travellers. Covid has only highlighted the inequalities that exist for members of the Travelling community, with the pandemic amplifying social imbalance in this country. With limited capacity to comply with public health guidance, particularly social distancing and self isolation, Covid has shone a light on just how vulnerable Travellers are as a result of lack of access to suitable accommodation. This has to change.

While there have been significant policy, legislative and design improvements in Traveller accommodation in recent years, the main challenge still remains. Until we can close the gap between agreed policy at national level, and the implementation of this policy by the local authorities that are responsible for the delivery of Traveller accommodation, we will continue to expose Travellers to further inequalities.

Recent data from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage<sup>2</sup>, reports that over one in ten Travellers are effectively homeless (13.5%)<sup>3</sup> and in need of proper accommodation. To put this in context, and using Census 2016 figures, this is the equivalent of 657,139 people from the majority population forced to live on the side of the road and/or double/quadruple up with other families.

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, housing authorities (based in local authorities) have a 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. However, the lack of political will and the lack of incentives or sanctions in the legislation have resulted in local authorities failing to provide adequate accommodation for Travellers and the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee (NTACC) and Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committees (LTACC) are purely advisory bodies with no mandate to compel local authorities to comply with their obligations.

<sup>2</sup> See Annual Count 2019 figures here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/departments/departments-of-housing-local-government-and-heritage/>

<sup>3</sup> Analysis derived from those 'Sharing Houses' (8.6%) and living in unauthorised sites (4.9%) (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2019)

The 2016 Government action plan to address the housing and homeless crisis,<sup>4</sup> contains just one specific action relating to the Traveller community: a recommended review of local authority Traveller Accommodation Programmes (TAPs) funding and expenditure for Traveller-specific accommodation since 2000.<sup>5</sup> This review was conducted and published in 2017 and found that between 2000 and 2017, expenditure fell from €135.2m, to €20.8m.<sup>6</sup>

Since the establishment of TAPs in 2000, a total of €69m has not been drawn down, and as of November 2020, only €2.5m of the Covid-19 allocation had been claimed.

We also note Traveller accommodation has been heavily politicised resulting in public representatives blocking the provision of Traveller accommodation.

Furthermore, the Irish State is in breach of international and domestic law and have been found to be violating Travellers' basic human rights regarding accommodation. In this light, we strongly recommend:

- A moratorium on evictions until the accommodation needs of all Travellers on the housing lists have been met as recommended by the Report of the Committee on Housing and Homelessness in June 2016; ensure adequate safeguards against forced eviction
- The National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee (NTACC) should be reconfigured & its role integrated into a National Traveller Agency (which would have broader competence in addressing Traveller issues including addressing education, health & employment etc.), with a stronger governance role than is currently the case in NTACC

We have seen how Housing has once again become the central focus of government, opposition, the media and society. The housing crisis affects Travellers also and we have yet another another opportunity to finally get it right – to properly legislate for and de-politicise Traveller accommodation.

It would be a shame to see Traveller accommodation get lost in the tidal-wave of the housing issues, which mainly affect the settled community. Access to accommodation that is affordable, habitable, accessible and culturally adequate, is a basic human right –as recognized by the UN.

We are not saying that access to suitable accommodation will be a fix all – challenges still remain for our community however, what we do know is that Traveller health (mental and physical), access to employment and access to education is negatively impacted by lack of access to a proper home.

This can only happen by changing the current system, which we know is not only 'not working', it has never worked. We need a National Traveller Agency to drive this change and I would ask all members of this Committee to support Pavee, and support Travellers, by de-politicising Traveller accommodation needs and supporting us in bringing about a change that is so badly needed.

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<sup>4</sup> (2016) Rebuilding Ireland: Action plan on Housing and Homelessness. Government of Ireland

<sup>5</sup> The Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 obliges housing authorities (based in local authorities) to assess the accommodation needs of Travellers and to prepare, adopt, and implement Traveller Accommodation Programmes (TAPs) in their geographical areas.

<sup>6</sup> RSM PACEC Ltd. (2017). Review of Funding for Traveller-Specific Accommodation and the Implementation of Traveller Accommodation Programmes. 31. Housing Agency, 53-54 Mount Street Upper, Dublin 2.