



## **Oireachtas Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community**

### **Opening Statement by the Ombudsman for Children, Dr Niall Muldoon**

**Tuesday, 15<sup>th</sup> 2021**

I would like to thank the Joint Committee, through its chairperson, for inviting me to appear today to discuss the publication of our investigation report called “No End in Site”.

(<https://www.oco.ie/library/no-end-in-site-an-investigation-into-the-living-conditions-of-children-on-a-local-authority-halting-site/>)

As members of the Committee are aware, the Ombudsman for Children’s Office (OCO) is an independent statutory body, which was established under the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002 (as amended). The OCO has two core statutory functions, namely:

- to promote the rights and welfare of children under 18 years of age
- to examine and investigate complaints made by, or on behalf of, children about the administrative actions of public bodies, schools or voluntary hospitals that have, or may have had, an adverse effect on a child.

This Report – *No End in Site; An investigation into the living conditions of children on a local authority site* was published on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2021 and was initiated because a Traveller Visibility Group and the local Traveller Women’s Network came together and contacted the OCO in 2018 about conditions at a local authority run halting site where 66 children and their families were living.

Eleven families then came forward and made complaints about a persistent problem with a high rate of childhood illness caused by living conditions; a lack of safe play areas for children; housing applications not being progressed; rodent infestation; inadequate sanitation; extreme overcrowding; safety concerns about access to the site; illegal dumping nearby; inconsistent and inadequate waste disposal; inadequate heating systems and unsafe electrical works.

The OCO met with families and visited the site on three occasions. In total, there are approximately 140 people using toilets and washing facilities designed for 40 and the residents say this has led to stress, tension and, at times, conflict.

During our investigation the HSE Director of Public Health Nursing told us that the children living on this halting site suffer skin conditions and respiratory problems at a much higher rate than the general population. The Chief Fire Officer told us that there are frequent calls to the site and we met with 17 children who told us that they feel different to their peers due to standard of the conditions on the site.

*“walking up to school you see all the rats” ..... “they would be running up and down the walls of the trailer” (girl 12)*

*“people ask why I’m dirty, but I’d be ashamed to say. I don’t want to say it was from walking out of the site” (girl 14)*

The conditions we found on the halting site in question were deplorable. To think that children in Ireland in 2021 are living like this is utterly shocking. Under no circumstances can this be accepted or allowed to continue.

Our investigation acknowledged the hard work done by the local authority and the difficult circumstances that might sometimes arise for their staff. However, ultimately we found that the local authority failed to consider the best interests of children, they didn’t maintain the site and housing applications were not processed or were incomplete. This meant some families may have missed out on a home. The local authority also did not account for the disadvantage experienced by Travellers.

We made a series of recommendations and we called for these to be overseen from the top, by the CEO to ensure that change happens. Our recommendations seek to improve conditions for children living on the halting site in the short term, and to bring about long lasting, systemic change in how Travellers are treated by the local authority.

This was a long and difficult investigation for the families involved, for the Traveller Advocacy Group and the local authority in question. Paralysis in the system cannot continue and I very much welcome the commitments made by the local authority to implement the recommendations from this investigation and in particular the expressed commitment by the CEO to ensure the necessary actions occur.

I will be seeking regular updates from the local authority on the progress they have made in implementing our recommendations and how the lives of children have improved.

The Irish Times said on 27<sup>th</sup> May last that this *“report shines a light on a grave problem that too many arms of the State wish to ignore”* and that is the big issue for our Office now.

It is not the follow up of this report, but the fact that so many other sites have come to light and nearly every Local Authority could be held to account in the same manner as this one has. In light of this we have taken a number of steps including writing to An Taoiseach and all leaders of political parties because we believe that the time has come to, once and for all, eradicate the racism and discrimination in our Local Authority planning system which allows children to grow up in standards that were abolished for the rest of the Irish population over 50 years ago.

The Taoiseach said in Dáil Session on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2021 - *“My understanding....is there have been lots of different initiatives and plans produced over time but they have not brought a resolution. The consequence of that failure to get a resolution to a lot of the issues is children living in absolutely unacceptable conditions in terms of health, hygiene, quality of life and so forth. It is absolutely unacceptable and the local authority will have to move decisively now in response to the ombudsman’s report.”* (Dáil Session on 26th May 2021 in response to Deputies Cian O’Callaghan and Mick Barry).

I have called on each political leader to instruct their representatives on Local Authorities all over the country to vote for progress on Traveller accommodation. No excuses should be accepted for blocking progress in providing Traveller accommodation or for failing to fully utilise ring fenced funds. I have also asked that the Minister for Housing and Local Government be much more proactive in the monitoring of spending in this area. It is the only budget that routinely is not spent

and the Minister must see to it that such underspends are not allowed to happen and if they do, there must be a serious oversight and audit of the workings of that Local Authority.

I would urge all of you here in this Committee to back that call so that this group of citizens and rights holders can begin to benefit from proper, safe and secure housing for the first time in many generations – perhaps for the first time ever.

We are also planning to hold a seminar in July and invite all the relevant staff in Local Authorities. We believe that there is a window of opportunity to change the narrative in this area, away from blame and accusations, and re-direct it back to properly focusing on the accommodation services we are providing for the children of our nation.

Thank you again for your invitation and for your time and myself and my colleague, Ms. Nuala Ward, are happy to take questions.