



Cumann Lucht Bainistíochta Contae agus Cathrach
County and City Management Association

Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community

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the County and City Management Association

In relation to access to housing and accommodation, including Traveller specific accommodation, in the context of the significantly higher homelessness rate among Travellers compared to the settled population

23rd September 2021

Chair, Members of the Committee, my name is Frank Curran, I am Chairman of the County and City Management Association Committee on Housing, Building & Land Use, and I am also Chief Executive of Wicklow County Council. I am accompanied here today by my colleague Colm Ward, Director of Services in South Dublin 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 examination of issues in relation to accessing housing and accommodation in the context of higher homeless rates amongst the Traveller Community.

This is a priority issue for local authorities, and we welcome the opportunity to discuss our work in this area and some of the challenges faced.

Local authorities have key statutory responsibilities in the area of homelessness under the various Acts such as the Housing Act 1988 and the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. As set out in the Housing Act 1988, Local Authorities do have general responsibility for the provision of housing for adults who cannot afford to provide it for themselves.

The Traveller Accommodation Act, 1998 places a statutory obligation on local authorities to make provision for the accommodation needs of Travellers through the adoption and implementation of 5-year Traveller Accommodation Programmes (TAPs).

In relation to housing, local authorities broadly aim to achieve a situation where every household in which a housing need has been established, has available to them an affordable dwelling of good quality, in a good environment, at a tenure of their choice, and in a location of their choice, as far as possible.

All applicants seeking social housing accommodation, including Traveller Specific

Accommodation, are required to submit housing applications and relevant documents, in accordance with Housing Regulations 2011. Where the applicant has particular family circumstances or a disability, the local authority will consider such issues when addressing the housing need. It is the policy of Local Authorities to consult with Traveller applicants regarding their accommodation needs and requirements to provide, where appropriate, Traveller Specific Accommodation

Traveller Accommodation Programme (TAP)

Each Local Authority has a Traveller Accommodation Programme (TAP), which aims to meet the existing and projected accommodation needs of Travellers in their areas, including providing Traveller accommodation in appropriate, suitable and well-serviced areas. The TAP is prepared and structured in a prescribed format and reviewed every four years. Specific programmes and actions are developed following an assessment of Traveller housing needs and a community and stakeholder consultation process. The programme is approved by the relevant Council and by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH).

Each November, Local Authorities undertake the "Annual Estimate of Accommodation of Travellers" which assists in drawing up these Traveller Accommodation Programmes. This has been useful in the past for providing the housing needs of Traveller families however of late Local Authorities are 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. In the absence of any such declaration Local Authorities are not classifying any person as being a member of the Traveller community. The CCMA welcomes the recommendation of the Expert Review Group on Traveller Accommodation, established in 2018, to formally record ethnicity in relation to housing applications going forward. The CCMA have two representatives on the Programme Board, established to oversee implementation of 18 of the 32 Expert Review Group recommendations.

The capital delivery programme for housing to meet the assessed and projected housing need of the Traveller community in Local Authorities is based on the Traveller Accommodation Programme. At present, the Traveller Accommodation Programme requirements in capital delivery and housing maintenance are met by the same delivery and maintenance teams that are tasked with meeting increasing housing delivery targets, increased housing stock and asset management requirements, voids and retrofit programmes.

Where Traveller specific accommodation is proposed a significant amount of consultation with families and communities is required to build trust, design the best housing solutions and create favourable conditions for the planning process. Such projects are very important but take up additional time and resources when capital delivery teams are already under severe pressure.

Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committees have been established in all Local Authorities. The role of the LTACC is to provide a forum whereby Traveller accommodation issues can be addressed in a timely and co-ordinated manner and where decisions are reached in as far as possible on the basis of mutual consensus. Membership of the LTACC consists of Travellers, Traveller Development Groups, Elected Members and Local Authority staff.

Accommodation

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).

With the support of Homeless Service providers including NGOs, Local Authorities also provide

emergency units of accommodation with specific supports to homeless families/Traveller families using the following accommodations types;

- Private emergency accommodation
- Transitional units
- Emergency accommodation
- HAP Homeless place finder
- Family Hubs

However, Local Authorities are experiencing a growth in young Traveller family formations as well as changing dynamics for the provision of housing solutions to Traveller families. The CCMA would like to clarify that Local Authorities provide emergency accommodation to Traveller families in the same manner as all families.

Local Authority Role

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the collaborative efforts of Local Authorities, the DHLGH, the HSE, Traveller representatives and others have been crucial in mitigating against Covid-19 within vulnerable groups. This unified approach continues to have a positive impact across the sector.

The CCMA worked with the DHLGH and the HSE to carry out a Covid Risk assessment of Travellers sites using a toolkit to identify areas that needed additional supports during the pandemic. The CCMA strongly believes that this very practical approach had a significant impact and Local Authorities will continue to build on the progress.

By April 2021, Local Authorities had drawn down €4.5 million of a total €15.5 million funding for the provision of additional facilities for Traveller specific accommodation. This included the provision of 111 accommodation units, additional water and sanitation facilities, electricity supply, additional site cleaning, additional waste removal, pest control and site improvement

works.

The rollout of estate management initiatives, where Travellers are residing in Local Authority housing schemes, will help improve relationships between Local Authorities and Travellers, and between settled community and Traveller Community through environment, sports, arts, libraries, age friendly, municipal district offices, housing and social inclusion /range of projects including sports days, family integration days, outreach programmes etc. These programmes are focused on developing a more positive estate management approach and the CCMA strongly believes will lead to the creation of new resident committees. The active engagement of all residents, including settled Travellers, is encouraged.

Where some Traveller families may feel isolated, greater interagency involvement may help break down barriers between the settled and Traveller communities.

The pre-tenancy programmes offered by NGOs supporting the Traveller Community which strive to ensure positive outcomes concentrating on day-to-day home maintenance, maintaining a tenancy, budgeting, advice and information on healthy eating, medication management and being a good neighbour and managing visitors are welcomed by the CCMA.

The Traveller Accommodation Support Unit within DHLGH is in regular contact with Local Authorities to provide support and funding as appropriate. In addition to capital funding for the build and refurbishment programme, the Department also provides specific funding to Local Authorities to employ Social Workers and Traveller Liaison Officers to work with and assist Travellers with their accommodation needs.

Homelessness amongst the Traveller Community

Evidence would suggest that homelessness amongst Travellers is higher than it is across the

population, generally. However, this data is difficult to capture as this is based on local knowledge only and where ethnicity has been declared, by them, as being members of the Traveller Community.

Progress is being made generally, in reducing homelessness with a 48% reduction in families in Emergency Accommodation, between July 2018 and July 2021.

Challenges

Local Authorities have advised that when Traveller families, become homeless, they can be larger families requiring additional resources and it may, therefore, be difficult to provide suitable accommodation to suit their needs. There is also a need to have suitable wraparound support service for individuals/families which involves communication with various stakeholders.

In relation to private rented accommodation, anecdotal feedback from Traveller families is that unfortunately some landlords are not predisposed to offer private rented accommodation to Travellers.

Where Traveller specific accommodation is proposed a significant amount of consultation with families and communities is required to build trust, design the best housing solutions and create favourable conditions for the planning process. Such projects take additional time and resources. These projects are not suitable for external design teams as close relationships are required to build confidence with families and communities.

Compatibility between Traveller families can be an issue in reallocating to Traveller Specific Accommodation.

Within Local Authorities, the role of a Social Worker is to provide care and case management to Travellers who present as homeless, need to make applications for housing supports or experience complex family issues requiring interagency interventions for many years. However, across the sector this resource is also tasked with a wide range of duties such as homeless service delivery and supervision. Child Protection duties and housing welfare for an increasing number of non-Traveller housing applicants can sometimes result in reduced capacity to meet Traveller specific support requirements.

Many Traveller tenancies require retrofit or extension works where families expand or have special requirements.

The number of presentations of single people using homeless services has increased across society in general due to the lack of supply of one-bedroom units. This has been recognised by all stakeholders and this is something that the CCMA is working with the Department to solve.

Conclusion

Local Authorities are under significant pressure to increase supports to ethnic minorities and do not have all the resources to meet demand. In accordance with the Housing for All strategy, the CCMA recognises and supports that addressing Traveller accommodation is one of a number of priorities that needs to be addressed.

The CCMA are working in partnership with the various stakeholders to drive the recommendations contained within the Traveller Accommodation Expert Review Group report.

The CCMA is of the opinion that there are potential opportunities around transitional housing, provision of housing specifically for elderly Travellers, and greater cooperation between neighbouring Local Authorities in the sharing of land and/or resources.

The CCMA welcomes the report of the “independent review of the role of Social Workers” and feels that 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 also concurs with the report that support for those staff working with Traveller Accommodation is required, and more mentoring/training and active case study learnings is vital.

Greater interagency involvement is required in some cases. A good example was during the height of the pandemic Local Authorities worked in collaboration with HSE ensuring the correct measures were implemented to help alleviate, where possible, the spread of COVID19. The CCMA welcomes this continued collaboration.

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

To conclude Chair, each Local Authority is actively supporting all members of the Traveller community not just those who present as homeless and continue to foster relationships with all the stakeholders to deliver better outcomes for Traveller families.