

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community
23rd September, 2021 - Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH)

Opening Statement of DHLGH

Introduction

Chair, Members, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to address the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community. My name is Paul Benson, Principal Officer in the Traveller Accommodation Unit within the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and I am joined by my colleague Eamonn Waters, Principal Officer in the Homelessness Unit in the Department.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about this important issue today. Addressing Traveller Accommodation issues and Traveller homelessness is a priority for the Department.

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.

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 Department's 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 period and form the basis for the allocation of funding from the Department for Traveller accommodation. Current TAPs run for the period 2019-2024

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 just 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 and
- 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

Traveller Accommodation Expert Review

The Traveller Accommodation Expert Group was established in 2018 to review the Traveller Accommodation Act, 1998 and other legislation impacting on the provision and delivery of accommodation for Travellers 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

A Programme Board was established to oversee the implementation of recommendations of the Expert Group and a work programme for 2021 has been put in place covering 18 of the 32 recommendations.

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). The Minister attends quarterly meetings of the Programme Board to hear updates on progress and the Board also updates the NTACC on progress.

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 Minister Burke 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 discussion 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.

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.

Traveller Homelessness

Travellers are overrepresented in the emergency accommodation facilities provided for people experiencing homelessness. We know this as the Department with responsibility for policy on homelessness and for Traveller accommodation.

The Committee will be aware of research published by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the ESRI which noted that one in nine of those who are homeless identified as Travellers. Homelessness amongst Travellers is higher than it is across the population of Ireland more generally. Travellers are more at risk of homelessness. This is reflected in research, and in our own work directly.

We also know that there is a relationship between social disadvantage and homelessness. An over representation of Travellers amongst the homeless population is unfortunately not a surprise therefore. However, it is not something that should be accepted. With local authorities, which have statutory responsibilities for the provision of homeless accommodation and in tackling homelessness, we are working to address this.

Some progress has been made in reducing homelessness generally across all groups. Looking at family homelessness, in July 2018 there were 1,778 families in emergency accommodation which was the highest recorded to date. This has been reduced to 930 families based on the most recent information from July 2021. It represents a fall of 48%. Significant challenges remain but these are being addressed.

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. It contains a comprehensive strategic approach to tackling homelessness. There is a commitment to eradicate homelessness by 2030.

Housing for All confirms a ‘Housing Led’ approach to tackling homelessness for all groups, and includes specific responses for members of the Traveller Community. When we say ‘Housing Led’, we mean that the most effective way to address homelessness is to provide more accommodation.

Under Housing for All there are specific and costed plans to increase supply across all tenure types, including very significant commitments to social and affordable housing, with over 90,000 social homes and 36,000 affordable and 18,000 cost rental homes to be delivered by 2030. There is also a commitment to fund the ambition of local authority TAPs and grow the Traveller-specific accommodation pipeline.

€4 billion in capital is being invested annually on social and affordable housing. This is the biggest such programme in the history of the State.

Housing for All includes 18 distinct actions tailored to eliminate homelessness. The ‘Housing First’ programme is central in responding to the needs of long term homeless single people who have complex support needs. There are also Travellers who fall within this category. This programme is in partnership between the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Department of

Health, the HSE, Local Authorities and voluntary housing bodies. Wrap-around supports are provided along with a tenancy. Under Housing First, an additional 1,200 supported tenancies will be created for homeless individuals over the next five years. This is addition to more than 750 tenancies that will have been created under the Programme by the end of 2021.

Many families, some of whom are Travellers, have found themselves trapped in long term homelessness. Housing for All commits the Department of Housing to work with local authorities and NGOs to identify families experiencing long-term homelessness that have complex support needs. Those that do will be provided with enhanced tenancy sustainment supports to help them exit homelessness and maintain their homes.

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.