

Opening Statement Amy Ward

National Accommodation Policy Officer Irish Traveller Movement

Good morning Chair, Deputies and Senators, many thanks for the opportunity to present to the Committee on behalf of the Irish Traveller Movement.

Before addressing the overall context of the Committee's focus and the facts and figures during questions, I'm presenting here in the capacity of a Traveller woman who sees daily the profound impact that inadequate accommodation has on my community.

A secure, affordable and decent standard home is an essential and basic human need for all of us, but doesn't seem to apply to Travellers, who have been largely excluded from housing crisis discourse.

While successive governments point to a range of policies focused in whole or part on the needs of Travellers, it's difficult to argue that any have led to the real changes needed to positively transform the life chances of people in my community.

We have seen a marked increase of Travellers forced to live on unauthorised sites, and experiencing 'hidden homelessness'. According to the ETHOS model, overcrowding is recognised under the definition of homelessness. In our recent response to the proposed amendments to the 1988 Housing Act, we noted (amongst other things) that typically, rights are established on an individual, rather than on a household basis. Therefore, adopting a framework that emphasises households, for which there is no legal definition, may further obscure the means by which the individual rights of Travellers experiencing homelessness are to be fulfilled by the appropriate governing bodies. Being that Travellers already face disproportionate housing discrimination due to housing stock shortage of adequate size for some larger families, and where they are more likely to become, or remain homeless for longer.

As we know, many policies are inherently flawed to begin with, and a lack of progress in improving physical and mental health outcomes has been accompanied by persistent disadvantage – or indeed backward steps – in the area of accommodation. This **should** have major implications for our current policy responses to Traveller accommodation needs, it means that a much greater urgency and policy effort is required to measure, understand and address the current crisis. And it is indeed a crisis- with latest figures showing **the number of Families Sharing increased from 828 to 907, (an extra 79) and families living on Unauthorized Sites rose from 487 to 654 (an extra 167)**, in one year, accounting for approximately 6,500 to 8,200 individuals. This does not include Travellers who are homeless, which is thought to be 1 in 4 of all people homeless in Ireland.

The accommodation crisis also plays no small part in our current suicide crisis.

We welcome the roll out of the Caravan Loan Scheme due for 2024 and recognise the hard work done to date. The Department confirmed earlier this week, that a review of the scheme will be conducted in 2024, and

gives some reassurance to national and local Traveller organisations who continue to raise concerns, about pace needed to meet the demand.

Concerns include the CLS process locally of designation of loans by county. Gathering data on the number of applications and refusals might give a more accurate reflection of need. Rather than providing culturally appropriate Traveller accommodation, some Local Authorities are advising Travellers to apply for an already extremely oversubscribed caravan loan scheme- even in cases where there is a failure to provide Traveller Accommodation, the availability of which being a prerequisite to application.

We wish to acknowledge the positive work being done by several LTACC's, we welcome this and will continue to support those efforts. Unfortunately, these LTACCs are in the minority, with many showing complete indifference to Travellers in their area, and others actively trying to stifle the possibility of any working relationship. We're aware of a recent case for particular concern where Traveller representatives and their allies who fought hard for a seat at the table, were met with active aggression. Yet it is through these structures that my community must try to create change, but it has failed us.

The magnitude of human cost cannot be overstated here. The importance of a home is most evident when people don't have one; so too culturally appropriate provision of Traveller Accommodation, and which lead to Travellers facing constant evictions, unable to treat chronic health conditions for example, children unable to attend school consistently, and mental health issues are exacerbated. When a family is living by the side of the road, it is impossible to prioritise other concerns. It essential that the oversight body, such as the National Traveller Accommodation authority recommended in the Expert Group's report on Traveller accommodation, is tasked with driving delivery.

We have in our submission contextualised the current status of Traveller accommodation in policy, planning and delivery and some recommendations, and I am happy with my colleagues, to discuss further with you.

Thank you.