

CORK CITY COUNCIL OPENING STATEMENT TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLING COMMUNITY.

1ST FEBRUARY 2024

Introduction

Chair, members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to attend the Joint Committee on key issues affecting the Traveller Community.

Attending the Committee meeting today is myself Brian Geaney, Assistant Chief Executive of Cork City Council and I am joined by my colleague Niall Ó Donnabháin, Director of Services, Housing Operations, Cork City Council. We welcome the opportunity to meet with the Committee to discuss policy matters relating to accommodation for Travellers and the progress made by Cork City Council in improving the living conditions of the Traveller Community in Cork City.

The Council welcomes the Final Report of the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community published by the previous committee and recognises that Traveller accommodation is a priority that needs to be addressed.

Overview

Cork City Council is fully committed to improving the quality, standard and availability of suitable accommodation for Traveller families across Cork City and works collaboratively and in partnership with families, advocacy groups and agencies to help ensure this can be achieved.

Traveller Accommodation Unit

Cork City Council has a dedicated Traveller Accommodation Unit (TAU) responsible for Traveller accommodation issues which comprises of six full-time staff members who work with the circa. 520 families who live in Cork City and engage with the Council. The TAU engages with families daily, has dedicated clinics to address their accommodation needs and has a dedicated Traveller Liaison Officer in place since February 2023 who alone has dealt with over 3,500 engagements/contacts to the end of last year.

The role of this unit is to implement the Traveller Accommodation Programme which has been drafted and implemented under the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998 which will deliver Traveller Specific Accommodation, standard housing and improvement works for the Traveller Community following an assessment of need survey conducted with the Traveller Community. The City Council has commenced work on the 2025 – 2029 Traveller Accommodation Plan and will engage extensively with families, advocacy groups and all key stakeholders to ensure the completion of a robust and comprehensive blueprint for Traveller Accommodation across Cork City for this five-year period.

Since 2021 Cork City Council has drawn down approximately €5.2 million of Department funding in improving the conditions for Traveller Families living in Cork City including site improvement works, fire safety works, replacement mobile homes, roll out of the Caravan Loan Scheme, purchase of properties, provision of welfare facilities etc. In addition, Cork City Council is currently developing five projects across our sites in line with the 2019 – 2024 Traveller Accommodation Plan with approved funding in the amount of €1.6 million to be spent. This is separate to the funding required to realise the planned redevelopment of the Spring Lane and Eills' Yard Halting Site on the Northside of the city.

Redevelopment of Spring Lane and Ellis' Yard

Cork City Council has carried out extensive engagement over the last two years with the residents of Spring Lane. A Stakeholder Engagement Specialist has been engaged from the outset to work directly with the residents in terms of each resident's long-term housing needs and requirements. The proposed design of each house, site layout and family grouping of

houses has been discussed with each family which has proved very beneficial in securing buy-in, building trust and identifying key issues throughout the process. While lengthy and resource intensive this form of direct consultation is necessary and will hopefully lead to better outcomes in terms of greater co-operation throughout the planning process, build phase of the development and future management of Spring Lane.

The intensive family specific consultation process has informed the proposed layout of the Spring Lane and Ellis' Yard site and the design of each residential unit. The necessary associated design work, on site surveys, environmental assessments, internal and agency consultation are now complete. As a consequence of these efforts, managed through our dedicated Project Implementation Team, a detailed proposal has been completed for twenty-seven new housing units between Spring Lane and Ellis Yard. Stage 2 Funding was approved by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the 29th January 2024. It is the Council's intention now to commence the formal Part VIII process without delay.

Traveller Participation and Engagement Initiative

The welfare and wellbeing of the Traveller Community is a high priority for Cork City Council. As part of a wider Traveller Participation and Engagement Initiative, the TAU has rolled out two pilot projects to Travellers in Cork City in the last year. The first was a child-led creative arts based project, across 6 creative workshops, that explored the themes of Home, Identity and Culture in terms of how the participants' view how their Irish Traveller culture is reflected within their community and their own sense of identity. The second pilot focused on the development of a culturally inclusive Tenant Participation Programme. The programme focused on Community Building and Networking, Tenant Rights and Responsibilities, Communication and Feedback Channels, Customised Participation Options and Collaborative Decision-Making. We are assessing the effectiveness of the programme through feedback from participants and we will use this feedback to refine and adapt the programme to better suit the needs of the community.

Both programmes were participant led and were flexible in their approach to aid their effectiveness. The Council's Traveller Liaison Officer is also a member of the Cork City Equine Initiative Steering Group, & CYPSC (Children and Young Persons Services committee) Keeping

Young Travellers Well subgroup. The TAU will also carry out Health Impact Assessments on any large developments for Traveller families going forward.

National Caravan Loan Scheme

Cork City Council has been part of the National Caravan Loans Scheme since 2021 and since this date Cork City Council has administered 31 loans to members of the Traveller Community. The scheme has been beneficial to give families an option of purchasing their own mobile home on a preferential loan basis. Cork City Council has experienced strong interest in this scheme and has a waiting list with twenty-nine applications across the city.

Cork City Council was allocated the following loans during the period of the National Caravan Loan Scheme:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Allocation</i>	<i>Value</i>
2021	15	€464,795
2022	10	€400,000
2023	6	€238,440

Cork City Council welcomes the scheme and will continue to offer this scheme considering the interest from Traveller families but feels that a review should be undertaken, taking in the views of families, advocacy groups and Local authorities to address the following issues:

- The unit cost of €40,000 is insufficient to allow the purchase of new mobile homes of suitable size and quality;
- The number of loan allocations should be increased where strong demand from families is being experienced;
- The cost for works required to facilitate the mobile home on site such as civil works, utility connection costs and any fire safety works required should be covered by the Scheme;

- Types of accommodation that fall within the Scheme should be broadened to allow for the option to develop modular type homes/Residential Standard Mobile homes as a more suitable and sustainable alternative.

Conclusion

Cork City Council is determined to fully implement the current and future Traveller Accommodation Programmes and has and will continue to commit significant time, resources and investment, with the support of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to achieving this goal.

The Council is confident that despite the serious and complex challenges involved, this targeted and focused approach together with the co-operation of other key agencies and Traveller Advocacy Groups that this unified effort will help achieve quality accommodation outcomes for Traveller families across Cork City.

**Brian Geaney,
Assistant Chief Executive,
Cork City Council.**

30th January, 2024