

Galway City Council Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community

22nd February 2024

Chair, members of the Committee, my name is Elizabeth Fanning, I am acting Director of Services for Housing in Galway City Council. I am accompanied here today by my colleague Ms Helena Martyn, Senior Executive Officer in Housing and Catherine Fahy, Senior Social Worker, Galway City Council.

Firstly, on behalf of Galway City Council we welcome the opportunity to attend the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Key Issues affecting the Travelling Community and to discuss policy matters relating to accommodation for Travellers, including matters relating to the Traveller Caravan Loan Scheme and the progress made by local authorities in implementing the recommendations featured in the Final Report of the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, which was published by the previous Committee.

Galway City Council welcomes the review of recommendations in the final report of the previous committee and recognises that Traveller accommodation is a priority that needs to be addressed. Galway City Council is committed to ensuring that the recommendations of the report produced by the programme board are prioritised and I will update the committee on progress on this accordingly.

Galway City Council has recently recruited a Traveller Accommodation Officer and Traveller Liaison Officer to join our dedicated Traveller Accommodation unit. This also includes a dedicated Executive Engineer (WTE 0.2), Assistant Engineer, Clerk of Works and Foreman. This unit is dedicated to support members of the Travelling Community in conjunction with the Social Work Unit and our tenancy sustainment supports both pre and post tenancy and help to support their transition into the new home as well as providing other wellbeing supports.

Accommodation

The Galway City Council Traveller Accommodation Programme provides for the development of Traveller specific accommodation as well as the management and maintenance of existing accommodation. We work in partnership with Approved Housing Bodies, the charity sector, and other stakeholders to assist Traveller families to ensure their accommodation needs are met via standard local authority or AHB housing, group housing and halting sites, or accommodation provided through subsidisation via the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) or Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS).

Galway City Council are currently drafting the new Traveller Accommodation Programme (TAP) for 2025 to 2029.

A letter of notification regarding Galway City Council's intention to prepare a draft Traveller Accommodation Programme was issued on the 4th of January this year.

Assessment of Accommodation Need

Galway City Council are required to assess the accommodation needs of Travellers residing in our functional area. The assessment of need must include an assessment of existing and projected accommodation needs during the period of the TAP, and the types of accommodation that are required.

To ascertain this estimate, account will be taken of the views of the Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee (LTACC), the Summary of Social Housing Assessment 2023 and any other information gathered by local authorities through consultation with stakeholders.

Assessment of Accommodation need letters were issued on the 12th of February to 567 Traveller families. Families are asked to confirm their accommodation need indicating their accommodation preference using order of number. The deadline for the return of the Assessment of Need forms is the 29th of February and analysis of the results will commence after that date.

There are an estimated 1748 Travellers residing in Galway city and every effort has been made to contact families as part of the assessment of need process.

The next steps in preparing our new TAP will include the following:

- Analysis the Assessment of Needs (AON) results
- Follow up with families who do not return their forms to source the necessary information
- Review the Social Housing Assessment when published later in March/April
- Consult with the LTACC regarding the AON
- Write the draft TAP programme
- Publication of Draft estimated date July/August 2024

Galway City Council Progress on Recommendations of the Final Report on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community

Recommendation	Progress Made by Galway City Council
67. As Travellers form a totally disproportionate percentage of the families and persons in homelessness because they find it harder to get accommodation in the private rental sector it is vital that the measures to reduce homelessness in Housing for All be implemented without delay.	Galway City Council has incorporated existing Traveller accommodation plans and programmes into its Housing Delivery Actions Plans, with provision for the delivery of c. 40 Traveller specific homes as proposed in the current Galway City Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019 – 2024 and will be

	<p>carried forward to subsequent programmes.</p> <p>Also, specific accommodation for homeless persons will be delivered through Housing First and Housing Led programmes.</p>
<p>68. An urgent audit should take place of living conditions in all Traveller specific and halting sites and immediate action taken to address deficiencies in accommodation, community facilities, public infrastructure, estate management etc. to be paid for out of an enhanced allocation for Traveller specific housing in the estimate of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. These actions should include short term emergency measures to improve matters and long-term provision of high standard accommodation for all travellers.</p>	<p>Galway City Council have gone to market on two occasions to engage a suitable competent surveyor to carry out audits and received no market response. A further audit tender will be published in Q1 2024. Galway City Council housing maintenance carry out planned programmes works across all the sites that include, external W&D replacement, Heating system upgrades, Damp remediation , Roof repairs, Kitchen upgrades, electrical inspections and upgrades, annual chimney cleaning, stove & ranges maintenance, annual inspections of Smoke & heat alarms, and fire blankets, sewer & storm drain cleaning, road repairs, traffic calming, waste facilities and rodent riddance programmes to address any deficiencies in accommodation, community facilities and site infrastructure.</p>
<p>69. The audit should include the mobile homes or caravans that are used as permanent dwellings. In the case of people/families wishing to remain living in caravans/mobile homes where they are deficient, they should be immediately replaced by new caravans/mobile through and expanded "loan scheme" or by direct supply by the relevant local authority. These should be funded out of the budget allocation for "Traveller Housing" and the quality of these caravans should be monitored in the short term by Cena to ensure they are of good quality. In the longer term this role should transfer to the National Traveller Accommodation Authority. The amount offered in the Caravan loan scheme should be monitored regularly to ensure that high- standard residential quality mobile homes can be afforded.</p>	<p>Routine maintenance of Traveller halting sites is ongoing, and the Caravan Loan Scheme is underway (update below).</p>

70. Where people would prefer more permanent type accommodation, such as a house or bungalow, on the same site this also should be accommodated.	Galway City Council is currently at construction to provide 5 No. culturally appropriate Traveller group housing units on land belonging to Galway City Council - Circular Road, Galway. This redevelopment, in conjunction with CENA, will replace the existing halting site bays and include 3 No. 3-Bed dwellings, a 4-Bed dwelling, and a 2-Bed dwelling.
71.Each TAP should be amended to reflect the result of this audit.	This will be included in the current TAP draft.
72.The audit should also reflect provision for expected new family formations and recognise the desire of many Traveller families to retain their strong family connections.	This will be included as part of the consultation for the new TAP 2025 – 2029.
73.The issue of the failure of many local authorities to get approval for Part 8 planning proposals must be addressed by the transfer of the decision making directly to An Bord Pleanála where local authorities are failing to implement their TAP due to refusal to pass Part 8 planning proposals or due to possible refusal having a chilling effect of the development of plans to provide adequate housing for the Travellers.	As Galway City lies in a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Areas (SPA) many of our developments are screened in for Part X planning to An Bord Pleanála (ABP). Unfortunately, we were refused planning permission by ABP on 2 sites in the city in 2023 which included for a total of 12 Traveller specific units.
74.A National Traveller Accommodation Authority should be established to oversee the development and implementation of Traveller accommodation policy and to have an input into the TAP developed by each local authority. Where a local authority is failing in its duty to provide good accommodation for Travellers the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage should have power to transfer responsibility for Traveller Specific Accommodation to the Traveller Accommodation Authority.	Galway City Council would welcome this proposal.
75.The inclusion of a Traveller Identifier on social housing application forms should be implemented as expeditiously as possible and without delay.	This was implemented in 2023.
76.Social housing applications should record Traveller's first, second and third choice of accommodation types, to better determine future needs.	This is recorded as part of the Housing Application process and can be amended if households submit a change in preference areas.

77.The method for determining the number of Travellers in a local authority area should be standardised across all local authorities.	Galway City Council would welcome this proposal, it also already captured under the annual summary of social housing assessment.
78.The 'local requirement' for social housing supports should be removed.	All applications are assessed under the current legislation.
79.Research on the design of culturally appropriate accommodation for Travellers should be carried out without delay, and should take into account Traveller household sizes, cultural considerations such as animal keeping, and future proofing to allow for future generations to remain living in proximity. Travellers must be engaged with and consulted throughout the process.	This research was carried out as part of the Circular Road Project and involved extensive communication with all stakeholders facilitated by CENA. Full consultation has taken place and continues to take place during the construction phase that is ongoing presently.
80.A network of transient sites should be established across the country without delay. Travellers should be consulted on their placement to ensure they align with Traveller nomadism patterns.	Galway City Council has provided a transient site.
81.Cena should be funded to advise social housing landlords on the design, location and management of Traveller-specific accommodation projects.	Galway City Council would welcome this proposal.
82.Trespass legislation, in particular where it relates to publicly owned land, should be repealed until the network of transient sites is in place.	
83.The ETHOS (European Typology on Homelessness) definition of homelessness should be adopted by all State bodies and Government departments, to better capture Travellers and others living in precarious accommodation or hidden homelessness	Galway City Council agree that the current capture of the figures for Travellers in homelessness may not be exact and improvements could be made.
84.Traveller specific accommodation funding, where not drawn down by local authorities, should be made available to Traveller groups and resident associations in Traveller specific accommodation developments and halting sites for small capital works including estate management maintenance, minor repairs etc.	

Caravan Loan Scheme

Galway City Council welcomes the National Caravan Loans scheme, which has been in place since 2021 and the improvements made to the scheme in 2023. The scheme aims to provide loans to the Travelling Community to purchase mobile homes as their primary place of residence.

We have had 34 applicants (10 of which were ineligible) and 8 successful applicants over the past 2 years, 4 of which are insitu and 4 that are currently being delivered and installed. Galway City Council is on track for a successful conclusion of this Scheme for 2022/2023.

Local authorities have highlighted that the maximum limit of €40,000 is not enough to cover the purchase of a caravan for larger families including the installation costs that are likely to occur.

Fire safety and civil works can cost up to €10,000 per caravan. Local Authorities would welcome a review of the funding in this regard and the possibility of a budget provided by the TAU to carry out necessary repairs to caravans as well as covering the costs of disposal of old caravans.

Welfare and Wellbeing Initiatives

The welfare and the wellbeing of the Travelling Community is a high priority for Galway City Council.

Below are examples of some Galway City Council initiatives supporting the needs of Travellers through a collaborative multiagency approach, working with the Galway Traveller Movement (GTM) and LTACC/LTACC subgroups to address issues on Traveller welfare/wellbeing:

- The Galway City LTACC has an agreed a 'Communications Protocol', which serves in part as an equality statement. It is underpinned by the Equality and Human Rights Value statement of the Galway City Local Community Development.
- A pilot Halting Site Estate Management Strategy is nearing completion and will be the first Traveller specific estate management strategy nationally.
- An assessment of equality and human rights issues faced by Travellers relevant for the mid-term review of the Galway City Council Traveller Accommodation Programme
- Galway City Council have undertaken an assessment of human rights and equality issues as part of the Mid-term Review of the current TAP in line with the recommendations given by IHREC.
- Implementing recommended actions to Galway City Council from the 2021 IHREC Equality Review
- Refurbishment of existing Circular Road Halting Site and including Traveller specific accommodation in future development.
- Making Traveller sites more child friendly (two installations of playgrounds completed in 2023 (under the Dormant account Fund)

- Members of the Galway City LTACC received equality and diversity training in December 2019, January 2020 and June 2023 with the assistance of our independent chair Niall Galway City Council Crowley of the LTACC. Further to training is planned for this month. also are planning to roll this across the wider organisation.

Conclusion

Galway City Council Traveller Accommodation Unit will continue to prioritise implementation of the recommendations in the Final Report.

While it is acknowledged that there are notable challenges in the delivery of accommodation, we will continue to work in partnership with stakeholders to assist Traveller families to ensure their accommodation needs are met.

Galway City Council staff work hard to maintain supports to all sites and it is essential that onsite estate management can be delivered without challenge.

This is not always possible and staff welfare and safety have been compromised at times. It is also the case that contractors have had to withdraw from sites, which has caused significant delay to planned works. This is not sustainable, and it is to the detriment of vulnerable residents when sites cannot be adequately maintained because of these issues.

Galway City Council supports a definition of culturally appropriate accommodation to provide clarity for all stakeholders involved. Galway City Council strongly support the recommendation to expand the caretaker role for Traveller specific accommodation. Galway City Council welcomes the continued collaboration between the DHLGH and continues to engage with the many stakeholders in the Traveller accommodation area.

We will continue to proactively engage with local Traveller communities and their representatives to understand the accommodation preferences and to plan Traveller specific accommodation for their areas. Offers of social housing support will include all available options and, where possible, the preferred type of accommodation.

It should be noted that accommodation in urban settings is generally unsuitable for the keeping of animals. Also, many of our Travelling community have a preference for housing in the county council jurisdiction. This requirement has been notified to Galway County Council for inclusion in their TAP.

Tenancy sustainment supports are provided for new tenancies and Galway City Council strongly support the recommendation to expand the caretaker role for Traveller specific accommodation. This would help improve estate management and lead to an enhanced regime for the management and maintenance of sites.

Access to the private rental market is difficult for all at present; the number of available rental properties has reduced, and rents have increased. There is an under supply of properties for larger family sizes, which has a more acute impact on the Traveller Community and there is also some evidence of failed tenancies leading to homelessness.

Galway City Council use all measures available to assist households seeking private rented accommodation including the provision of Homeless HAP Placefinder support, CBL and the use of the differential rent hardship clause, where appropriate.

More recently, the Tenant-in-Situ Scheme has been used successfully to prevent homelessness and Galway City Council have purchased three houses for Traveller families and prevented homelessness.

The Tenant Purchase Scheme has also assisted one Traveller families purchase their home.

The Galway Housing Task Force also addresses Traveller accommodation and homelessness. Galway City Council will continue to report on progress through the Task Force as well as quarterly updates to the Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee (LTACC) and report annually to the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee (NTACC).

Thank You.