

**22<sup>nd</sup> February 2024**

**Dublin City Council – Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community**

**Speaker: Mr Tony Smithers, Senior Executive Officer of the Traveller Accommodation Unit**

Chair, members of the Committee, my name is Tony Smithers, I am the Senior Executive Officer with responsibility for Traveller Specific Accommodation throughout Dublin City. I am accompanied here today by my colleagues, Ms Denise Doyle, Head of the Traveller Accommodation Unit and Ms Sorcha Farrell, Senior Social Worker.

Firstly, on behalf of Dublin City Council. I would like to thank the Committee for extending an invitation to attend the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Key issues affecting the Traveller Community. We welcome the opportunity to participate in the discussions.

Dublin City Council welcomes the review of the recommendations in the final report. We recognise that Traveller Accommodation is a priority and are committed to providing good quality, sustainable and culturally appropriate accommodation.

Local Authorities are governed by the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998 and have general responsibility for the provision of housing for adults and families who cannot afford to provide it for themselves. Traveller Specific Accommodation is included in this provision and expected delivery plans are outlined in our Traveller Accommodation Programmes. Dublin City Council is currently in the process of drafting our new Traveller Accommodation Programme which will come into effect in December 2024 to cover the period 2025-2029.

The City Council is working in partnership with Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs), the HSE, Tusla, Community Representative Groups and other key stakeholders to provide assistance to Traveller families in need of housing and additional supports. Our aim is to support Traveller families in obtaining accommodation that suits their family's needs.

Our Housing Department includes a dedicated Traveller Accommodation Unit (TAU) which specifically deals with Traveller families living in existing culturally appropriate Halting Sites and Group Housing Schemes, along with Traveller families seeking accommodation across 14 sites throughout Dublin City. Additional support is provided by a team of five Social Workers, including one Senior Social Worker, dedicated to working with members of the Traveller Community.

Importantly all current staff have completed both Cultural Awareness and Anti-Racism Training through Pavee Point. This training has been extended to all Council staff via our Human Resources Dept in conjunction with Pavee Point. We see this as an important step in progressing our internal training system for all staff throughout the organisation dealing with the Traveller Community and other Ethnic Minorities.

**Accommodation**

Since the commencement of our current Traveller Accommodation Programme in 2019 Dublin City Council's TAU have committed to improve service delivery across all of our Traveller Specific Group Housing Schemes, Halting Sites and Unauthorised Sites. We take a collaborative approach and

engage with key stakeholders to provide high quality, fully serviced, sustainable and culturally appropriate homes.

As noted in previous presentations to this Committee, access to the private rented market is difficult for all at present. The lack of availability of larger housing units impacts particularly on Traveller families and there is also some evidence of failed tenancies which has led to homelessness. Dublin City Council use all measures available to assist families seeking private rented accommodation which includes the provision of Homeless HAP Placefinder support and the use of the differential rent hardship clause, where appropriate. More recently the Tenant-in-Situ Scheme and extension of the Choice Based Letting Scheme online has been successfully used to prevent homelessness.

Dublin City Council's TAU staff work hard to maintain prompt service delivery and estate management processes across all of our sites. There have however been several incidents where staff welfare and safety on site has been compromised. This has also been the case with contractors who have had to withdraw their services from sites. Incidents such as these severely hamper progress on our sites and it is to the detriment of vulnerable tenants when sites cannot be adequately maintained because of threats to staff and contractors. Dublin City Council has taken steps to remedy these issues including engaging the services of the Traveller Mediation Service and continue to endeavour to deliver the required services to all of our sites.

Since 2021, Dublin City Council has housed 44 Traveller families from our Housing List who had an AK priority; the TAU has spent in excess of €24.2m through its Revenue Budget on maintenance and repair of our sites along with providing a waste removal service and over €12.9m on our Capital Works Programme. For 2024, the TAU has a Revenue Budget of €6.7m and a Capital Budget of €7.9m.

### **Caravan Loan Scheme**

Dublin City Council welcomed the introduction of the National Caravan Loan Scheme in 2021. The scheme aims to provide loans to the Traveller Community to purchase mobile homes as their primary place of residence.

- 18 loans were successfully issued in 2022 by Dublin City Council to the total value of €720,000.
- Funding for 8 loans was granted to DCC in 2023 with funding for an additional 2 no. loans made available in December 2023. All have now been allocated to families on our waiting list. The total value of these loans amounts to €400,000.

While Dublin City Council are happy to participate in this scheme, it is our view that the maximum loan amount of €40,000 is not sufficient to provide the type of mobile home required for larger families and we would be happy to discuss this in more detail.

Dublin City Council takes a multi-agency approach to deal with the wider issues affecting the Traveller Community. This will include working with CENA on the design and construction of culturally appropriate homes, the Irish Traveller Mediation Services with regards to conflict resolution on sites, the Community Gardaí to help forge better relationships with our Traveller families along with Exchange House, Traveller Primary Health Care, the HSE and Tusla with their provision of childcare and community support facilities.

In terms of improvements to accommodation standards the following works give an insight into our work programme:

- The TAU completed a maintenance audit across all of our sites in 2023 following which we have implemented a site-by-site maintenance and repair plan (commenced in January 2024) to address these issues.
- We undertook and completed a Pilot Retrofit Programme in Cara Park. Of the 28 houses completed, one house received an A3 rating while the remaining 27 obtained a B1 rating. An extended Retrofit Programme is planned for 2024 which will see all of our remaining Traveller Specific housing stock receive a full energy upgrade. These works have contributed to resolving and reducing any outstanding maintenance issues on site which will also reduce costs going forward;
- We are implementing a new Waste Management Plan 2024 across all of our Traveller Specific sites and we would be happy to provide more information on this too.

### **Welfare and Wellbeing Initiatives**

Dublin City Council's TAU are also committed to assisting Traveller families in accessing support services through our Social Work Team, Tusla and the HSE. This support has included help in accessing Mental Health services and Occupational Therapists where families have disability and/or mobility issues that require adaptations to their accommodation.

The Social Work Team provides a holistic, specialist support service to Traveller individuals and families through responsive, preventative and advocacy work. Social Worker's work collaboratively with Traveller Representatives, Traveller Representative Organisations and statutory and non-statutory agencies on a continuous basis, not only in an effort to sign-post and support individual families and to resolve personal and housing-related difficulties, but also to address and progress wider issues affecting the Traveller Community. Social Worker's also assess and make Traveller Priority recommendations with regard to families' housing needs and advocate for Travellers in relation to housing vacancies.

The Senior Social Worker on the Social Work Team for Traveller's is responsible for co-ordinating and completing the returns for the Annual Estimate of Traveller Families and Their Accommodation Position on behalf of Dublin City Council. In 2023, a total of 854 families were identified in Dublin City Council area on the date of the count. Although currently the figure for homeless Traveller families and individuals cannot be included in the returns to the Department, the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) identified a total of 52 households identifying as Traveller families and accessing emergency accommodation in Dublin City on the date of the count.

As a result of the *Review of the Role of Local Authority Social Workers Assisting Travellers with Accommodation Needs*, commissioned by The Housing Agency in 2020, Traveller representatives and local authority social workers and managers were consulted, a vision was developed and the LGMA is currently conducting a review of Local Authority Social Work.

The Traveller Accommodation Unit has contacted our Human Resources Department to request a re-establishment of the previous Apprenticeship Programme which was specifically aimed at members of the Traveller Community to assist them in gaining employment. The LTACC is also looking at ways that we might support the Traveller Community to start their own business in the circular economy in an effort to assist with and encourage accessibility to employment and self-employment.

### **Conclusion**

The Traveller Accommodation Unit hopes to continue to foster and develop new and existing relationships in an open and transparent manner with all members of the Traveller Community, their

Community Representatives, Local Government Representatives, the DHLGH and our neighbouring Local Authorities.

Dublin City Council fully supports a definition of culturally appropriate accommodation to provide clarity for all stakeholders involved. We hope to continue to work collaboratively to achieve not only a greater understanding of the Traveller Community but to deliver culturally appropriate accommodation in an urban setting.

Ends

**Labre Park/Kylemore Grove, Ballyfermot, Dublin 10 – Group Housing Scheme/Halting Site**

**Number of Housing Units: 22 Bungalows, 8 Bays**

**Number of Voids: 2 houses – 1 pending refurbishment, 1 pending demolition as per Redevelopment Plans**

**Number of Families on site: 35 (as per 2023 Traveller Count)**

Labre Park, Ballyfermot, Dublin 10 is a Traveller Specific, Group Housing Scheme and a Halting Site consisting of 14, 3-bed Bungalows and 8 Bays with Sanitation Units. Kylemore Grove, Ballyfermot, Dublin 10 is a Traveller Specific Group Housing Scheme consisting of 8, 4-bed Bungalows. Families on site have full Tenancy Agreements and are charged Differential Rent. Families living in the Bays have signed a Licence Agreement and have been provided with Sanitation Units.

Traveller families have lived on this site for over 40yrs. There have been several attempts over the last 20yrs to complete a redevelopment of the site however, to date works have not commenced.

However, at the commencement of the Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019-2024, Cluid Housing were brought on board to design culturally appropriate homes and complete a redevelopment of the site. Through their assessment of the site a number of issues were highlighted including contaminated soil and significant flood risks. This resulted in an estimated budget request of €27m for the overall project which was submitted to the Dept of Housing in mid-2022. On review of the request, the Dept of Housing have agreed a budget of €16.6m to fund the housing aspect of the project. They have advised Cluid and the Traveller Accommodation Unit that they will not be funding works relating to the contaminated soil and flood risk. The Traveller Accommodation Unit have been working internally with other Dublin City Council Departments to try and obtain funding for these works through other streams of funding. Discussions are currently on-going along with a review of the original design plan underway.

Labre Park has experienced significant issues over the years not only owing to maintenance and repair works but also due to anti-social behaviour on site and on-going issues with illegal/unauthorised dumping and burning of waste. In 2020, the Traveller Accommodation Unit were notified of significant drainage issues on site which allegedly resulted in a number of occupants becoming ill. These issues were believed to have contributed to an outbreak of HEP A on site. The HSE and the Ombudsman for Children completed a full assessment of the site and while they could not find a definitive cause for the outbreak they contacted the Traveller Accommodation Unit and advised of a list of works they felt were required to improve living conditions on site.

Phase 1 of these Improvement Works were carried out as an emergency project and were completed at the end of 2021. A full upgrade of drainage, water and electrical connections were completed, along with installation of fire walls and resurfacing of ground works. New and upgraded Sanitation Units were also provided to families on site. On completion of the works both the HSE and the Ombudsman for Children attended site to complete a review of the works. Both agencies were highly complementary of the Traveller Accommodation Unit's immediate response to the issues outlined and the standard of the works completed. They officially closed their investigation on foot of this inspection.

A Pilot Waste Management Plan was also implemented on site on foot of the HEP A outbreak. Each family on site were provided with 1100ltr bins and a weekly collection service which has significantly reduced dumping on site. The Traveller Accommodation Unit are now focused on assisting Cluid with the commencement of the Redevelopment Plan.

**St Margarets Park, St Margarets Road, Ballymun, Dublin 11 – Halting Site**

**Number of Housing Units: 30 Bays**

**Number of Voids: 0**

**Number of Families on site: 32 (as per 2023 Traveller Count)**

St Margarets Park is a Halting Site on St Margarets Road, Ballymun. There are a total of 30 Bays on site which consist of a Day-House structure, fire walls and space for one mobile home. Families on site have full Tenancy Agreements and are charged Differential Rents with a further 5% reduction owing to the fact they live in Bays rather than houses.

The Day-Houses were originally constructed to provide bathroom, kitchen/utility space for families on site who wished to live in mobile homes. It was hoped that by providing the Day-House structure the mobile homes would then only really be used for sleeping in which would reduce the risk of fire.

However, the Day-Houses have aged significantly and require regular maintenance and repair. It was proposed under the Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019-2024 to redevelop St Margarets Park and replace the Day-Houses with a Bungalow structure. Unfortunately, the families on site rejected the initial design as the fire walls were retained and the families felt their homes would be too closed in. Ultimately, the consultation process broke-down and families became frustrated with the lack of progress and on-going maintenance issues. At the start of 2020, the Traveller Accommodation Unit commenced a refurbishment programme on the Day-Houses to help alleviate some of the problems on site. However, works were halted due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This led to additional frustrations on site which prolonged delays with the progression of the redevelopment plans.

Since early 2022, the Traveller Accommodation Unit have re-engaged with the families on site and have had several consultation meetings with a view to getting the redevelopment plans back on track. Families have requested that the site be provided with a second entrance and the communal area be pedestrianised. They have also requested a mixed development to include a retention of some of the existing Bays with an upgraded/extended Day-House and either a Bungalow or single storey Modular Build Home for the rest of the site.

Towards the end of 2022, the Traveller Accommodation Unit liaised with the Irish Traveller Mediation Services to assist with conflict resolution on site. This mediation process is currently on-going and some positive progress has been made.

The Traveller Accommodation Unit hope to setup a Community Committee which will include representatives from the families living on site along with all key stakeholders e.g. staff from St Margarets Park Primary Health Care Service, the HSE, Tusla and the Community Gardaí. It is hoped that the commencement of this Committee will help progress the redevelopment plans and allow for the families on site to have a direct input into the design and layout of their new homes.

The Traveller Accommodation Unit has also approached Cena with a view to getting them involved in the design process.