

## **Joint Oireachtas Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community**

**10.30 Thursday 11 April**

### **Attendance by Department of Education officials:**

Clíodhna O'Neill, Acting Assistant Secretary

Grainne Cullen, Principal Officer

Frank Hanlon, Principal Officer

Kate Waterhouse, Assistant Principal Officer

### **Opening Statement**

Cathaoirleach,

Thank you Cathaoirleach and Committee members for the invitation to attend today.

#### *Introductions*

This meeting is timely as the Department is making considerable progress in its work to develop a Traveller and Roma Education Strategy, in line with the commitment in the Programme for Government. We are working in close collaboration with Traveller and Roma organisations and in partnership with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). A significant consultation process is underway with the Traveller and Roma communities, including children and young people from those communities, with a view to developing a draft for the

relevant Ministers at the end of this quarter. This is also a commitment in the Department's annual statement of priorities, Forbairt.

This is the background against which our work on implementing many of the Committee's recommendations in its own report is occurring. Today's engagement will feed into our work on the strategy.

The Department's Statement of Strategy 2023-25 sets out our vision for an education system where every child and young person feels valued and is actively supported and nurtured to reach their full potential.

This drives all our work and will be a guiding principle in the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy.

I will address some of the key points raised by the Committee in correspondence.

### ***Funding for Traveller education – investment in social inclusion***

A key objective of Traveller education policy in recent years has been a move towards greater inclusion. This has included the phasing out of segregated education provision for Traveller children and the inclusion of Traveller children and young people in mainstream education. In line with this, funding previously used for segregated provision for Traveller children has been incorporated into overall school and other funding streams in order to provide additional supports necessary to enable Travellers' participation in mainstream education on equal terms.

The DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools) programme is a key policy initiative of the Department to address concentrated

educational disadvantage at school level in a targeted and equitable way. In 2022, a refined DEIS identification model was used to identify schools for an expansion of the DEIS programme. The new model now ensures that the number of Traveller and Roma children enrolled in a school is calculated into the DEIS identification model.

The DEIS programme was expanded significantly in 2022 to include 322 additional schools in the programme, which as a result now supports 1,196 schools.

As a result of this expansion, the percentage of Travellers enrolled in schools in the DEIS programme has increased considerably.

In 2020/21, 52% of Travellers enrolled in primary schools were in schools supported through the DEIS programme. This increased to **71.9%** in 2022/23 following the extension using the refined model.

At post-primary level, the figures increased from 48.6% to **55%** over the same period. This equates to over 63% of Travellers across primary and post-primary level, which compares to an overall proportion of 25% of students in schools supported through the DEIS programme nationally. The Department spends in excess of €180 million on additional supports through DEIS annually.

While not all Traveller children attend DEIS schools, all schools are eligible to receive additional capitation based on the numbers of Traveller children enrolled in the school. The basic capitation rate is €200 per student in primary schools and to €345 per student in post-primary schools. Additional pupil capitation for Travellers is €75 per pupil at primary level, and €213.50 per pupil at post-primary level. This is provided at a current annual cost of €1.3 million.

There are also ten additional Home School Community Liaison coordinators now supporting 14 post-primary schools outside of the DEIS programme where a need has been identified due to the numbers of Traveller and Roma children attending. This is funded through the Dormant Accounts Fund.

### ***Provision and resourcing of Visiting Teachers for the Traveller Community***

The Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers was discontinued in 2011. While this was a budgetary measure as part of a reduction in the education budget, this was done in line with the policy move towards inclusion and away from segregated provision.

In our schools, the allocation model for special education teachers facilitates targeted supports for all students who require additional support, including literacy and numeracy support. This includes the provision of support to Traveller children, in an integrated and inclusive context.

### ***Reduced School Days***

The Department published *Guidelines on the Use of Reduced School Days*, which came into effect from January 2022.

The guidelines set out that any use of reduced school days must be limited, considered by a school only where it is deemed absolutely necessary, and can only be implemented with the consent of a student's parent or guardian.

Schools must inform Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) when a student is placed on a reduced school day.

The Department will continue to monitor the use of reduced school days, including through the work of the Inspectorate. We will publish and review data on the use of reduced school days to understand more about when and how these are used in schools: in line with the guidance, only where necessary and to the benefit of the child or young person.

### ***After school homework clubs***

Several Department programmes can support homework clubs for students at risk of educational disadvantage, including Traveller children. These include the DEIS grant, which many schools use to support homework clubs after school, and other after school activities aimed at groups of children deemed to be at most risk of educational disadvantage, including Traveller children.

The School Completion Programme, which supports attendance, participation and retention across DEIS schools, can be used to support after school clubs.

Homework clubs are also among the initiatives currently underway as part of the Supporting Traveller and Roma (STAR) in education pilot project.

DECDIY also funds some after school activities and homework clubs, through Tusla, which do not fall within this Department's remit.

### ***STAR***

A pilot project, STAR – Supporting Traveller and Roma in education, was established in 2019 and rolled out incrementally across four pilot sites in Cork, Galway, Wexford and Dublin. It aims to address the

barriers impacting on Traveller and Roma attendance, participation and retention in education.

Costing €1,1 million annually, it is funded jointly with DCEDIY and provides Education Welfare Officers (EWOs), Home School Community Liaison officers (HSCLs) and Traveller or Roma community education workers, who work together with the schools to support children and families. Tusla Education Support Service and Traveller and Roma representative bodies are key stakeholders.

An independent evaluation is currently underway by the Centre for Effective Services (CES), to be completed in the coming months. This will provide further information and evidence to inform the development of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy.

### ***Progress on the recommendations***

We have sent the Committee an update on the implementation of the recommendations of the Committee's report, which we are happy to discuss further today.

### **Conclusion**

The Department is deeply committed to providing a supportive and inclusive education system for all children and young people. We have built strong relationships with stakeholders and are working in real partnership to develop the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy.

I would like briefly to reference the Department's Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying, which is based on the UNESCO whole-school approach and aims to ensure that schools are welcoming and inclusive for all.

It was informed by consultation with children and young people, including Traveller children and young people. I also want to refer to the Department's work in ensuring that children and young people are meaningfully included in decision making on issues that impact them. The views of Traveller and Roma children are also captured in this work and will continue to be.

Thank you for giving us this opportunity to engage with you during today's meeting and we look forward to answering your questions and later using our discussions today to inform the ongoing development of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy.