

Meeting of the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community

18 April 2024 | Opening statement of Bernard Joyce



Bernard Joyce – Accommodation – Speaker 1

I extend heartfelt gratitude to Senator Eileen Flynn for her leadership spearheading this morning's event, underscoring the indispensable role of Travellers in decision-making processes. Without our central involvement, true solutions remain elusive, impeding our right to self-determination and stifling our ability to define our future and needs.

As an Irish Traveller representing the Irish Traveller Movement, I bring the urgent matter of Traveller accommodation within the national policy landscape. Despite promising initiatives, the lack of implementation and the harsh realities faced by our community remain stark.

The disheartening reality is that, despite years of advocacy and engagement, the systemic failure to address overcrowding, poor accommodation, and homelessness persists, constituting a grave violation of human rights.

The Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 provides the legislative and policy framework setting out the statutory responsibilities of local authorities and the national and local oversight infrastructure, for the provision of accommodation and related supports to the Traveller community.

In 2022 over 1,000 Traveller families including over 2,500 children have no permanent electricity or heating or are living in an overcrowded home designed for single families. This is 246 more Traveller families than the year before and amounts to over 4,500 people nationally. The extent of which has been seriously neglected and underestimated.

The lack of adequate response from the state is concerning. The disparity between the mere 44 units of Traveller accommodation built by local authorities from 2019 to 2022, when need was assessed at 3,060 units also contrasts with the rate of 10,000 New 'housing' builds delivered in the same time nationally. It exacerbates both the challenges faced by the community and the absence of government oversight. Moreover, with Travellers being 22 times more likely to experience discrimination in accessing private rented accommodations, the situation highlights the urgent need for more comprehensive and equitable policies to address these pressing issues.

In May 2022 the Report of Implementation of Traveller Policy highlighted significant hurdles facing the effective implementation of Traveller accommodation, and the actions required to address it taking account also of the recommendations of Government commissioned Expert Group Report on Traveller accommodation.

It highlighted implementation obstacles including

- Racial Bias ingrained and resulting in Local resistance rooted in racial prejudice
- Insufficient data which hampers evidence-based planning, monitoring, and delivery of accommodation.
- Land Accessibility and Affordability:
- Inadequate Needs Assessment: characterized by inaccuracies in identifying current and projected needs and limited consultation with local Travellers,
- Limited incentives and accountability mechanisms within local authorities lead to a lack of urgency in delivering accommodation outputs, exacerbated by the absence of penalties for under-performance.
- Staffing shortages in the Department of Housing to oversee and drive policy implementation effectively and Oversight Limitations in local oversight structures with sufficient powers and resources.

Despite the existence of five Traveller Accommodation plans over 26 years, the current situation starkly differs from the intended goals, underscoring the pressing need for comprehensive reform and renewed commitment to address systemic challenges. In the protection of human rights, The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) equality review of local authorities delivering Traveller accommodation strengthened the focus and pathway to overcoming obstacles.

It's imperative on local authorities to fulfill their responsibilities in addressing Traveller homelessness and accommodation needs. Our community experiences are echoed in the magnitude of suffering and neglect, expressed as feelings of abandonment and worthlessness. They face eviction, barriers to education, and exacerbated mental health challenges due to their living conditions.

The ongoing violation of Traveller rights is highlighted often by international bodies and last month again by the European Committee of Social Rights who required urgent action by the State who have remained in violation 8 years on.

Many specific recommendations outlined in the Oireachtas Committee Report on Traveller must be swiftly implemented now, and we urge Minister of State for Traveller accommodation Alan Dillon to ensure pace is accelerated especially in these areas.

- The establishment of a National Traveller Accommodation Authority to oversee accommodation policy and intervene when local authorities fail to provide adequate housing. Where, progress on this front remains a significant concern.
- Implementation an ethnic identifier on social housing applications, as proposed by both the Committee and the Expert Review on Traveller Accommodation, to allow for better monitoring of housing needs and planning, but this has yet to be achieved.

- Conducting an urgent audit of living conditions in all Traveller-specific and halting sites is imperative to address deficiencies highlighted in reports, yet no national audit has been conducted.
- Repeal of trespass legislation concerning publicly owned land until a network of transient sites is established is crucial. To date while the Department of Justice has responded to acknowledging the request, there is no definitive decision on the action needed.

In conclusion, we cannot continue to ignore the plight of our people., it's time for change, to rectify the grave human rights violations our community faces. Our children deserve better, and it's incumbent upon us today to ensure their right to a safe, dignified living environment is upheld.

For further information please contact Bernard Joyce director@itmtrav.ie The Irish Traveller Movement