DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM SHAINCHEISTEANNA RÍTHÁBHACHTACHA A THÉANN I GCION AR AN LUCHT SIÚIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

Dé Máirt, 12 Deireadh Fómhair 2021

Tuesday, 12 October 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3.00 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 3.00 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Joan Collins,	Victor Boyhan,
Patrick Costello,	John Cummins,
Francis Noel Duffy,	Mary Fitzpatrick,
Joe Flaherty,	Rebecca Moynihan,
Thomas Gould,	Eugene Murphy,+
Emer Higgins,	Pauline O'Reilly,
Richard O'Donoghue,	Ned O'Sullivan,
Eoin Ó Broin,	Mary Seery Kearney.
Éamon Ó Cuív.	

+ In éagmais le haghaidh cuid den choiste / In the absence for part of the meeting of Senator Mary Fitzpatrick.

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Cathal Crowe.

Teachta / Deputy Paul McAuliffe sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The attendance list is a combined list of members present from the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community.

Joint Sitting of the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community

Business of Joint Committees

Vice Chairman: I welcome all members to this joint meeting of the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community. As the inviting committee, the Standing Orders of the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage apply but I want to particularly acknowledge the Vice Chairman of the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, Deputy Ó Cuív. Unfortunately, the Chairpersons of both committees are unable to attend. I will be chairing the first half of this meeting.

Apologies have been received from Deputy Flaherty. Deputy Cathal Crowe will substitute for him.

Traveller Accommodation: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Vice Chairman: The purpose of today's meeting is to engage with the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, the Irish Traveller Movement and the County and City Management Association, CCMA, on the programme for Traveller-specific accommodation in local authority areas across the State. Deputy Ó Cuív is not with us but will join us shortly.

We are joined by the Minister of State with responsibility for planning and local government, Deputy Peter Burke. I will ask him to make an opening statement. Members will then be invited to address their questions. For the sake of convenience, we have combined the membership of both committees into one and will use the running order that is normally applied in the housing committee, which I will read in a moment. I will call on members to remember to confine their questions to five minutes at first. We will have a second round of questions when, if possible, members will be able to come in again.

Members attending remotely within the Leinster House complex are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentations they make to the committee. This means they have an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything they say at the meeting. However, they are expected not to abuse this privilege. It is my duty, as Chair, to ensure the privilege is not abused and, therefore, if members' statements are potentially defamatory to an identified person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks and it is imperative they comply with any such direction.

I remind members of the constitutional requirement that members must be physically present within the confines of the place where the Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster

House, in order to participate in public meetings. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way that would make them identifiable. The opening statements submitted to the committee will be published on the Oireachtas website after this meeting.

In a moment, I will ask the Minister of State to make his opening statement. For the clarity of members, I will read the speaking order by party, so that members of both committees are familiar with it. We will start with a five-minute slot for one speaker from Fianna Fáil, followed by Sinn Féin, Fine Gael, the Independent Group, the Green Party, the Labour Party, the Social Democrats, People Before Profit-Solidarity and Right to Change. We will thereafter commence a second round of questions. I invite the Minister of State to make an opening statement to the committee.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I wish members a good morning and thank them for the opportunity to address the joint committees on the matter of the Traveller expert group report and review of Traveller accommodation. I am joined by two officials from my Department, Mr. Paul Benson, principal officer, and Ms Ann Gill, assistant principal officer.

The Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 provides that local authorities have statutory responsibility for the assessment of the accommodation needs of Travellers and the preparation, adoption and implementation of multi-annual Traveller accommodation programmes, TAPs, in their areas in order to meet the identified accommodation need. The Department's role is to ensure that there are adequate structures and supports in place to assist the local authorities and approved housing bodies, AHBs, in providing such accommodation, including a national framework of policy, legislation and funding. It is a matter for each local authority to set targets for the provision of Traveller accommodation, which they outline in their TAPs. These programmes provide a roadmap for local authority investment priorities over the plan period and form the basis for the allocation of funding from the Department for Traveller accommodation. Current TAPs run for the period 2019 to 2024 and will be up for mid-term reviews at the end of this year.

An annual count of Traveller households is carried out by local authorities in early November. The most recent audited estimate for 2020 indicates that there were approximately 10,809 Traveller households in the State, 78% of whom live in standard accommodation and 22% of whom live in Traveller-specific accommodation. The 78% in standard accommodation includes 45% in local authority or approved housing body tenancies, 18% in supported tenancies in the private rental sector, 9% in shared housing and 6% in accommodation provided by Travellers from their own resource. The 22% in Traveller-specific accommodation includes 8% within group housing schemes, 9% on authorised halting sites and 5% on unauthorised halting sites.

There is no doubt that delivery on Traveller-specific accommodation has been disappointing in recent years and this is reflected in the levels of funding that have been drawn down. I am pleased, however, to report that local authorities made full use of the €14.5 million available for Traveller-specific accommodation in 2020 and it is hoped this will be repeated with the €15.5 million budget for 2021.

It is important to note, however, that accommodation for Traveller households is provided through a wide range of housing options. The majority of Travellers live in standard housing, including local authority and approved housing bodies, housing, and housing assistance pay-

ment, HAP, and rental accommodation scheme, RAS, supported tenancies in the private sector. Funding for these housing supports are provided through the respective budget lines. The Traveller accommodation unit's budget is provided solely for Traveller-specific accommodation, such as halting sites and group housing schemes. Accordingly, funding available for, and spent on, the provision of accommodation solutions for Travellers is much broader than the often reported spend under the Traveller-specific accommodation budget. The Department continues to work with all our stakeholders to improve the delivery and standard of all types of Traveller accommodation and this will continue.

The recent publication by the Ombudsman for Children's Office, OCO, has shone a spotlight on the unacceptable conditions on the halting site that was the subject of the ombudsman's investigation. While the conditions on this site are not true of halting sites in general, as there are many examples of well designed, managed and maintained sites throughout the country, it is equally true to say they are not unique. This cannot be accepted. Prior to the publication of the ombudsman's report, my Department embarked on a series of monthly meetings with the relevant local authority to discuss the options and supports required to deal with the challenges on this site. These meetings continue and we will support progress being made on the recommendations outlined within the OCO report.

To date, my Department has recouped funding of circa €700,000 to the relevant local authority to carry out essential maintenance works on the site. In April 2020, my Department approved funding of €5.4 million for the development of the adjoining site for Traveller-specific accommodation development. In June this year, I met with the chief executive and senior management of the local authority and asked them to outline their plans to address this issue and the issues raised within the report. I also met families on the site to hear all their views.

My Department has recently supported the employment of a mediator by the relevant local authority to establish baseline data on the site, its occupants and their accommodation requests. It is providing support to the local authority to complete a full health and safety audit of each bay on the site to identify what works are required and has confirmed to the local authority that funding will not be an obstacle to making progress. The Department continues to meet with the local authority on a monthly basis and receive progress reports**.**

The Traveller accommodation expert group was established by my Department in 2018 to review the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 and other legislation impacting on the provision and delivery of accommodation for Travellers. The expert group presented its report in July 2019. The report sets out an integrated set of recommendations intended to improve the effectiveness of the arrangements for providing accommodation for members of the Traveller community. These recommendations address four key themes: delivery reflecting need, planning, capacity and resources and governance**.**

Earlier this year I established a programme board to oversee implementation of recommendations from the expert group. The programme board includes two Traveller representatives, the County and City Management Association representatives and two representatives from my Department. It is chaired by the chair of the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee, NTACC. I attend quarterly meetings of the programme board to hear updates on progress being made by the board and members from the committee. The programme board has put in place a programme of work for 2021, which covers 18 of the 32 recommendations. These are being worked on by officials in my Department with the help and support of various other stakeholders.

On funding allocation, to facilitate ease of access to funding, the Department ceased allocating specific budgets to individual local authorities in 2020. Instead, it is open to all local authorities to apply for, and draw down, funds at any time throughout the year and this is actively encouraged by the Department.

On CSO data, the Department has liaised with the CSO regarding the upcoming census to ensure all Travellers are facilitated and participate in census 2022.

Regulations are being implemented shortly to provide for a Traveller identifier on the social housing support application forms. This will allow for evidenced-based planning for Traveller accommodation and will also support the traveller accommodation programmes, TAPs.

On the management and maintenance of Traveller-specific accommodation**,** I approved a 50% increase in funding for the management and maintenance of halting sites and group housing schemes earlier this year. Research is being commissioned to consider the design and long-term maintenance of Traveller-specific accommodation. This will involve wider stakeholder engagement and consultation and, ultimately, will result in updated guidance for local authorities and AHBs in the design of Traveller-specific accommodation.

As part of the work of the programme board, the Department will explore the provision of an all-island approach to the provision of a network of transient sites across the island of Ireland and discussions in this regard have begun with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

On the reporting of the provision of new Traveller-specific accommodation, delivery of new Traveller-specific accommodation, such as permanent halting sites and group housing schemes, will be tracked under Housing for All and reported in progress reports against the 50,000 new-build social housing targets.

On the link between local authority development and Traveller accommodation plans, the Office of the Planning Regulator, OPR, has been working closely with my officials on this issue and has just completed and published a case study paper, Traveller Accommodation and the Local Authority Development Plan. This will help inform our work in this area.

Other recommendations currently being worked upon include: social housing assessment regulations, transfer policy from HAP-RAS to Traveller-specific accommodation, use of local authority emergency powers, the Part 8 planning consent process for local authority-own developments and trespass legislation.

On the independent Review of Local Authority Social Workers and Personnel Employed to Assist Travellers with their Accommodation Needs, to ensure that services relating to Traveller accommodation needs adapt and remain relevant, the Department commissioned research into the role of social workers and personnel employed by local authorities to assist Travellers with their accommodation needs. Since the mid-1960s, local authorities have employed social workers to support Travellers in meeting their accommodation needs. Since then, the nature and scale of the demands on local authority housing departments have changed and local authorities have taken on new housing responsibilities. The Department is liaising with the CCMA on the implementation of the recommendations contained within the report.

To ensure Traveller households have access to good quality caravan-trailer accommodation, the Department, following extensive consultation with stakeholders and approval from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, has rolled out a six-month pilot preferential caravan loan scheme in four local authority areas. Following a review of the pilot, which it is hoped

will be successful, the intention would be to roll it out nationally during 2022, incorporating whatever changes are deemed necessary arising from the review. The scheme has the potential to significantly improve living conditions for Traveller families and will be fully supported by the Department.

Housing for All: a New Housing Plan for Ireland is the Government's housing plan to 2030, which was launched earlier this month. It is a multi-annual, multi-billion euro plan that will improve Ireland's housing system and deliver more homes of all types for people with different housing needs. Some €4 billion in capital is to be invested annually on social and affordable housing. This is the biggest such programme in the history of our State. The Housing for All plan specifically recognises the importance of addressing Traveller accommodation needs as a priority and commits to working with local authorities to improve the quality of housing for Traveller-specific accommodation, fund the ambition of local authority Traveller accommodation plans and grow the Traveller-specific accommodation pipeline. I thank the Vice Chairman and members for their time. I am happy to take questions.

Vice Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. I note that Mr. Paul Benson, principal officer, and Ms Ann Gill, assistant principal officer, are in attendance. I call Senator Fitzpatrick.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister of State and his officials for attending today. I acknowledge the presence of Deputy Ó Cuív, who is Vice Chairman of the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community. I also acknowledge and thank the stakeholders who have engaged with the Minister of State's Department on issues affecting Traveller accommodation. We have discussed this issue in private meetings of this committee, so I am delighted that we can have this joint meeting of the two committees today with the Minister of State and his officials. The Minister of State's statement acknowledged that there have been decades of under provision and that he and his officials, to their credit, are energetically trying to reverse and address that issue. I commend him for that.

In his statement, the Minister of State also acknowledged that responsibility lies with the local authorities. All local authorities have not performed equally. Certainly, some local authorities have significantly underperformed. While the board and the expert group have a remit to look at the legislation and its impact, I am concerned that there remains a lack of real-time monitoring and evaluation of the performance of the local authorities in this area. Will the Minister of State advise us regarding what actions he thinks can be taken, perhaps as part of the mid-term review, to improve the oversight and accountability in respect of each of the local authorities? The last tranche of funding allocated to the local authorities was used, but that funding was significantly reduced from what had been budgeted in this area in previous years.

I also ask the Minister of State to advise us if he intends to give an instruction to local authorities to take a specific action when developing their county development plans to identify sites for Traveller accommodation. I refer specifically to transient sites. It is important and I am wondering if he is considering taking that action. Turning to the caravan loans scheme, I welcome the Minister of State indicating that he is considering extending the scheme. When does he anticipate making that decision and to what extent does he see the scheme being extended?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Senator Fitzpatrick for her questions. Regarding the expert report, and the 32 recommendations contained within it, one of the biggest challenges that the Department and I have faced is the absence of clear and salient data on the number of Traveller families in our country and the types of housing accommodation they require to meet their needs. That is why, through our expert report, we will shortly have a Traveller-specific identi-

fier on our social housing application forms. In addition, we are also working with CSO on the upcoming census to ensure that Travellers are a key component of the work that will be carried out in that regard and that we will as a result get better data to inform our decision-making within the Department. It has been a big challenge. The programme board I have established is monitoring the situation and working on this aspect. As I pointed out as well, the board has taken 18 of the 32 recommendations to address first and has included those in its work programme. That is a significant body of work and it will unlock many of the blockages in the system. The board has the full support of my Department to do that.

Turning to the budgetary measures, we have been increasing our budget year-on-year in recent years. It is not yet back to the scale of the years before the recession, but we are working on increasing it. As the Senator said, we spent all our money in this area last year. We are hoping to repeat that this year. I corresponded with all the local authority managers and chief executives to remind them of their responsibilities, and those of the local authorities, to the Traveller community in carrying out their duty as the chief executives of the local authorities. We are working hard to do that.

Moving on to my role in the county development plans, that is clearly set out in legislation. The Office of the Planning Regulator, OPR, is adjudicating and reviewing all the county development plans to ensure they conform with our Traveller accommodation programme and meet the needs of the travelling community. I note that the Planning Regulator in his recent report stated that approximately 94% of those plans have specific objectives contained within them. However, we still have a significant amount of work to do in that regard. The programme board will be working on reforming the Part 8 process concerning the emergency powers afforded to the chief executives of local authorities. Streamlining those powers would require primary legislation. The group is leading and implementing that work. It is recommending to me the work to be done on each of those 32 recommendations. The group has set out its programme of work and strong voices from the Traveller community are on that programme board. An increase in the number of Traveller voices on the board was sought and granted. We have, therefore, shown our energy in this regard and our commitment to work with the people involved to ensure that we get all those recommendations implemented.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: To pick up on the Minister of State's last two comments, I am not so sure about the commitment. I will explain why in a moment. Equally, I do not see any energy evident in tackling the issues we are dealing with. Those of us who have large Traveller-specific sites in our constituencies, as many of us here do, know that the conditions under which adults and children continue to live are a scandal. What bothers me regarding how we discuss this issue is that the Housing Agency and the Department commissioned a report that was completed and published by Professor Michelle Norris in 2017. It set out all the problems in this area. It then took us almost two years to get a working group together. The group produced a brilliant report, but that was in July 2019. The substantive recommendations in that report have not been implemented yet. I will return to that point in a second.

One of the most frustrating things is that throughout the last year and half I have submitted parliamentary questions to the Minister of State asking him to provide, in tabular form, information on the state of play with each of the 32 recommendations contained within the report. We have yet to get that information. The programme group is monitoring that work, but this committee should also have information, line by line, on where we are going with those recommendations.

Progress has certainly been made with some of the recommendations. The Minister of State

mentioned them. I acknowledge that aspect. The key recommendations, however, those that will transform whether we really start to deliver good quality Traveller-specific accommodation, are concerned with changes to the legislation governing land transfers and Part 8 planning applications. That undertaking is not even in the legislative programme. I have yet to hear, therefore, an update from the Minister of State on those things he has responsibility for and that were central to the recommendations made by the expert group to enable us to tackle this issue head-on. Will the Minister of State update us on when he intends to bring forward the legislation to give effect to those two key recommendations of the expert group's report?

Moving on to the second key element, namely, the underspending, there was only full expenditure last year because a large volume of that spending went on dealing with the impacts of Covid-19. I welcome that, but it does not demonstrate that the historical refusal of our local authorities to spend their allocations has been dealt with. I suspect that the problem will return once we are on the other side of the Covid-19 pandemic. I do not accept that the change in the funding allocations was a good thing. I am convinced that it was done to conceal the blushes of the local authorities that requested an allocation in line with the Traveller accommodation programmes in their county development plans and then did not draw down the money. Nothing I have heard to date has convinced me otherwise.

The really problematic aspect, however, is that I have repeatedly asked through the parliamentary questions I have submitted how many Traveller-specific units of accommodation, that is new units, were delivered this year, last year and the year before. I have yet to get a clear answer from the Department and the Minister of State through those parliamentary questions. My second question now, therefore, is will he tell us how many Traveller-specific units of accommodation were added to the stock this year, last year and the year before.

The most regrettable thing in all this is that there is not a dedicated full-time official in the Minister of State's Department driving this programme forward. It was one of the central requests made by the representatives of the expert group when they came before our committee. Why will the Minister of State not appoint a full-time dedicated senior official to drive the implementation of the report and its recommendations? Until that happens, we are going to be here with the same level of frustration that I suspect we will hear when representatives from the Irish Traveller Movement present to the committee later this afternoon.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Ó Broin. I contend that the energy is there in this regard. I argued in my opening statement that the required actions are being taken. I was appointed to this role in July and I was given responsibility in November for the area of Traveller accommodation. Subsequent to my appointment, I established a programme board to drive the reforms set out in the 32 recommendations. I have set the board in train reflecting the views of the Traveller community at every step of the way and I have its support in that regard. I will not dictate to the board which recommendation should be done first, second or third. It is up to it to recommend to me the specific changes it requires and its priorities. This is done directly with Traveller groups in response to their demands.

The budget has been fully used in my first year and I expect the same to happen this year. I have been working morning, noon and night trying to ensure local authorities get the message loud and clear that we are absolutely committed to delivering on this budget. We want it all to be spent. Any objective individual looking in or questioning my energy and work in this brief can see we have increased by 50% the amount of funding available for the maintenance of bays and areas. We have increased by up to 75% the funding of caretakers for sites and we have also set up the programme board. We will have data on which the Deputy will be able to judge my

performance when we have the Traveller identifier in place through the social housing application forms. We will be able to assess the need and specific type of Traveller accommodation required in the State.

Vice Chairman: The Minister of State's time is up. We must proceed to the next speaker.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Just for the record-----

Vice Chairman: I am sorry Deputy Ó Broin. To be fair to the Minister of State, I cut him short so it would not be fair to allow you to come back in.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I ask the Minister of State to revert to us at a later stage with answers to my specific questions. I would appreciate it.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I will give the Minister of State some of my time to finish what he was saying.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Senator very much. We are committed to implementing each of the recommendations and the NTACC is responding to me on each of the them. I attend every second meeting of the committee, which is driving the reforms. It has held about five meetings already this year. Its independent chair has a strong track record in this area. We met representatives of the Ombudsman for Children's Office. I travelled to the site in Cork and I was in and out of every bay and trailer. I am working hard to try to resolve this issue with the community there and I am gaining their trust, which is important.

I would appreciate if we all tried to work together, including the committee, and be positive in assisting me in trying to resolve the huge issues we have. No one is trying to hide this. That is why I am making this role more transparent. I will be able to have very clear data by which Deputy Ó Broin and other members of the committee can judge my performance. There will no ambiguity. That is so important. As I said, that is the case with the budget this year and the other initiatives we have taken. I am absolutely committed to this role. I have not yet been in it a year, as far as my responsibility is concerned. I will not have anyone question my energy and commitment because those are there in abundance. I am only one person but I can do my very best on it.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I thank the Minister of State. My focus, coming from my particular area, is on the effect of this on children. Some of the children living on these sites will talk about walking to school, seeing rats and being concerned that rats are running up and down the walls of trailers. It is harrowing to read in the No End in Site report about children living in those conditions. I urge that its recommendations be implemented and we have some sort of oversight. We have seen issues with other sites around the country and I know from representations I made, with my Seanad colleague, Senator Flynn, that the Minister of State intervened and stepped up when he was asked to do so. Using that experience, how can he reassure Traveller groups and the committee that the experiences of children on the site that was the subject of the report are not replicated across the country?

Deputy Peter Burke: The Senator can look at the trajectory of increasing funds in budgets in recent years. In budget 2022, we have a capital budget of approximately €18 million, whereas in 2020 we had €14.5 million. That is borne out by the commitment from me and from the Government as a whole to responding to the challenges in this area, and we are committed to doing that.

The Office of the Planning Regulator is doing a review of all the country development plans. The first case study was published. It is about trying to ensure all local authorities are meeting the objectives of the Government, as contained in this.

The caravan loan scheme will be a key tool for people who wish to avail of a good quality caravan or trailer at a preferential rate. They will be able to draw down up to €30,000. Four local authorities are piloting this project which I hope to roll out nationally next year. Again, that is a commitment by the Government to provide the type of accommodation Travellers want as part of their ask through the expert group and their requests therein. This shows that we are following through on our commitment. I want to roll that scheme out nationally.

I have always operated an open-door policy for any of the Traveller representative groups, from the local authorities to the Ombudsman for Children's Office and the rights commissioner. If people have pressure points they want me to resolve or if they feel something is not being given an adequate amount of time, I am happy to push as hard as I can and drive reform in this area.

I fully appreciate the frustration people have. I have two young children and the last thing I want to see is young children having to contend with challenges like walking through muck and dirt and living in substandard accommodation. I am certain no member of this committee wants that either, so we are all trying to achieve a common objective here. That is reflected in the increase in the budget and the way I am trying to respond to the challenges in this area.

On the report to which the Senator referred, I have leaned on the local authority in question. I went down there and pushed as hard as I could to get these matters resolved.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister of State. I wish him well in what is a very challenging job indeed. In his statement, he referred to Housing for All. It is interesting that the Irish Traveller Movement raised this as one of its priority issues in a submission to us. It states:

> ... Housing for All plan commits to prioritising the implementation of the Expert Review recommendations, however there are no enumerated targets included for Traveller accommodation in the plan and there are no timelines attached for the implementation of the 32 recommendations.

These are not disconnected issues; they are linked. It is important to provide targets, timelines and sufficient resourcing for each local authority to ensure what is promised is delivered on and the people who are responsible are ultimately held accountable for specific Traveller accommodation. We must ensure these successes and targets are measurable. That is the big challenge and task. The Irish Traveller Movement has asked the committee to ensure these targets, timelines and sufficient resources are in place and clearly outlined so we can see how this implementation advisory group's review recommendations are implemented. That will be important.

My only ask today is that the Minister of State establish a national Traveller accommodation authority to independently monitor and oversee the planning and delivery of the Traveller-specific accommodation. I ask that he commit to establish a national Traveller monitoring group that would oversee the delivery of Traveller accommodation. Local authorities have run into difficulties and have simply not delivered. We must move on.

I will address two other issues the Minister of State also raised. The Office of the Planning Regulator produced a case study paper, CSP03, entitled Traveller Accommodation and the Lo-

cal Authority Development Plan. The Minister of State mentioned it a moment ago. It is an excellent document - an excellent piece of work and really important. I refer to the pilot caravan loan scheme. I was a councillor 20-odd years ago and we were talking about pilot caravan loan schemes then. There has been a number of such pilot schemes. What have we learned from them all? I am somewhat surprised that the CCMA, through four local authorities, is carrying out another pilot. I do not know whether it has looked at the past and learnt from the mistakes that were made such that we can move forward. I am somewhat shocked and surprised that this is now being piloted all over again. There is nothing new in that. If that is the best that people here can do, it is very disappointing.

One cannot but be alarmed by what the Ombudsman for Children talks about and his serious concerns. Children are at risk. I use the word "risk" in a very broad sense. The conditions are squalor, rat infestation, no sewerage and no running fresh water on certain sites where we have our children. This is in a country that talks about cherishing the children of the nation equally. That is not happening. The Minister of State and I know the problems. This is nothing personal. I believe he is up to this and committed to doing something about it. I thank him again for coming before the committee. My final ask is the establishment of a national Traveller accommodation authority to monitor and oversee independently the planning and delivery of Traveller-specific accommodation. That is what the Traveller community is looking for and we should be able to deliver on it.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Senator for his contribution, which I appreciate is a very genuine one, on the challenges we face in this area. The programme board was established towards the end of March, so we are talking about a six-month period. I have told the board I would like to see timelines in respect of each of the actions it has taken off for their first round of implementation, which is about 56% of all the recommendations. In the first instance, my view was that if I were to set up an independent committee with an independent chair and a number of very eminent people within the Traveller community to drive forward this programme of work, I would not want to dictate to them how to do their business. I will get an update on each of the recommendations. I would have no issue circulating that to the committee and its members for their perusal in order that they might see the work that is ongoing and the progress that is being made. I am very clear when I attend meetings with the board about any support it needs or blockages it encounters as it goes through each of the recommendations.

The report of the Ombudsman for Children is very disturbing. Senator Boyhan is absolutely right about that when he talks about cherishing all children equally. That is why we have had a huge amount of engagement with the particular local authority. We have had monthly meetings. I have been down there, been on site, spoken to all those families and asked them what their particular needs are. One of the biggest frustrations I have had since entering this role is the lack of data. There are 10,800-odd Traveller families. Approximately 80% of them are in standard accommodation, with different funding streams from the State underwriting their tenancies. Then there is a smaller proportion, potentially less than 5%, whose needs are the most acute, with many living on unauthorised sites. We have commissioned 250 audits in 2021 to try to upgrade the conditions in which they are living and ensure that this provides a better quality of life for them. I accept that it has been talked about over a number of years, but I will specifically raise Senator Boyhan's point about the agency with the programme board. It is responding specifically to the 32 recommendations contained in the expert group review, and the energy is focused on resolving those blockages. In turn, our hope is that we will see more and better quality accommodation for our Traveller community.

Vice Chairman: Senator Moynihan is due to speak but she is in the Chamber. I will move to the Green Party slot and hold the Labour Party slot. Senator Pauline O'Reilly and Deputy Duffy are present. They might indicate who will take the slot.

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: Senator O'Reilly will take it.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for attending. He is in a difficult position, having been in post for one year, and I think everybody recognises that. However, it is the job of these joint committees - I am a member of the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community - to point out what the issues are on behalf of the Traveller community, members of which would say something similar if they were here. It is important to note that members of that committee have undergone training on the cultural aspects, which is important. It is unfortunate that Senator Flynn is on maternity leave. This points to one of the issues I was going to raise - I have raised it previously at the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community - that is, a query as to how many Travellers are in the Department. The Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community compiled a report on employment in the Traveller community, and this was one of the issues that came to light, not specifically in respect of the Minister of State's Department but just as to what we can do. This is not pointing at one Department but, because the Minister of State is here, I will highlight that we need to do better in the public sector in ensuring, first, that that kind of discrimination is not there and that we are doing something proactive in order to make sure we have different groupings represented because people need to be in the room when the decisions are being made.

My second point is about the AHBs. We had Cena before us last week, which I think most committee members would feel was very impressive in being an AHB specifically for the Traveller community, backed by the Traveller community. I would love to know if there is funding going into that Traveller-specific role AHBs can play. This has been raised numerous times here. We cannot just turn our backs on the kinds of lives children are leading. It is not just a matter of the squalor in which many are living but also the fact that only 8% of Travellers finish school, with 1% in third level. What the report of the Ombudsman for Children has shown is that the type of accommodation in which children are living is impacting that and their future prospects. We have to get this right. I believe the Minister of State wants to get it right. I believe that all the things in Housing for All show that that is a reality. However, we need to be open to all the questioning and to be transparent along the way in order to continue that level of trust, to rebuild it or even just to start it. Having come from Galway City Council, I can tell the Minister of State it just has not been there. The council has drawn down funding for the first time in a long time - I think all local authorities drew it down last year - but it is nowhere near enough.

Deputy Peter Burke: I welcome absolutely what the Senator says. As stated earlier, I would welcome the improvement of data in order that the committee and its members can critically evaluate my work. That is very important. We need to be in possession of improved data.

As for Senator O'Reilly's engagement with the Traveller groups and members of the Traveller community, nothing I have seen has shocked me because I have been engaging with them. I have been on their sites and in their homes, I have gone through all the issues with them, I have spoken to members of the Traveller representative bodies and I have made it crystal clear that my door is open if there are any issues surrounding the implementation of the expert group recommendations or any blockages. I have also had good, thorough engagement in respect of the issues that are there so I am not shocked by anything in that regard. I assure the Senator that

I am on the ground with the issues we are trying to resolve.

The Senator mentioned in her contribution one very important thing, namely recruitment of individuals through the Public Appointments Service, ensuring diversity and balance in respect of people from the Traveller community. This shows the wider stakeholder involvement that is required across the Government to resolve the blockages in respect of this issue, not just in my Department. I will raise that with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. I fully understand the need for that. It is slightly beyond my remit but I would support the Senator on her call because it can only add value. The National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee and the Traveller groups are front and centre of the work I am trying to do here. There will be frustrations, I fully accept that, but we are trying our best to resolve the matter. We are only two or three days past the sixth anniversary of the Carrickmines tragedy which shook this nation. I do not want to see another tragedy like that in the State in my time or after. It reflects the poverty in and vulnerability of communities living in our State and we have to move might and main to resolve that.

Vice Chairman: As there is no speaker for the Social Democrat slot or People Before Profit-Solidarity, we will move to Right to Change, Deputy Collins.

Deputy Joan Collins: Many of the areas have already been covered. I was listening closely and I know things have improved. I have linked in with the community at St. Margaret's Traveller site in Ballymun where the community is caught in behind high walls and have super depots being built around them while the conditions they live in remain absolutely dire. Only for the community on site, it would be a lot worse because they are very proactive in trying to deal with the issues. They were seeking to have mobile homes replaced because the ones they have are so old. They are still waiting for that. In the meantime, they were hoping that small cottage-type homes would be built in the community. Over the years, there has been a breakdown in trust between the council and all the halting sites. Trust needs to be beefed up and the Traveller community has to see the powers-that-be moving very seriously on these issues now. Overcrowding on those sites is still a big issue and the conditions with sanitary conditions and access to water. I would hope that the council, the Department and the Government really respond to the needs of the Traveller community, particularly when they are very positive about wanting to work with the local authorities after all the years of their needs being left in abeyance. There has to be urgency around the replacement of those mobile homes - all of them - and a plan for the building of homes on the site for the community. There is the same situation in Labre Park where Cena had to move in to try to negotiate to get the build there. I know things are in place now, and at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Travelling Community, one speaker said that it took a long time to get to the bad state that we are in and it will take a while to get us out of that, but when the Traveller communities link in with the authorities, they should be responded to very positively. There should be no problem with money for replacing mobile homes. I cannot see what the delay could be on those. I am sure that is also happening on other sites, although I have not been in contact with them.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Collins for her questions and acknowledge the work that she is doing on the ground with the Traveller community. On Labre Park, we engaged directly with the community as did the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. One of the first things I did when I got responsibility for Traveller accommodation in November was write to Senator Eileen Flynn to try to forge relationships and get a greater understanding from a policy maker's side of what we need to do to respond to these challenges. Deputy Collins mentioned the positivity of the Traveller community. As I have gone around the country and met members

of the Traveller community, they have been hugely positive, full of ideas on how to resolve and rebuild the trust within State institutions which we so badly need. I mentioned Carrickmines and there is also the Ombudsman for Children's Office, OCO, report. These are conditions that no State institution should stand over and we really need to work so hard to address them. I want us to be judged on our actions.

The pilot caravan loan scheme has had 47 applications in south Dublin. I think the number is slightly lower for Dublin city where there have been 15 or 16 applications. It is also pretty high in Cork. The funding will not be a barrier for the scheme. There are some issues that we are trying to resolve around insurance cost through the pilot and we hope to be able to launch a more robust scheme next year. That is reflected in the increase in the budget. There is also the remedial works. We carried out 250 audits around the State. We increased funding for the upkeep of Traveller bays by 50%. There was 75% for the funding for the caretaker roles. These demonstrate our commitment to trying to resolve this issue. I have leaned on chief executives around the country and as recently as the past two weeks wrote another very strong letter on their responsibility to spend all the money that is there and reminding them that there is money there in the Department that we want to see spent. We do not want any carryover. It will really frustrate me if there is a carryover under this heading because we want to get all the money spent as we continue to increase the capital budget which is €18 million in 2022. The commitment is there but we need everyone working together. I really value the relationship that I have with Traveller representatives. I have been in many of their homes and their hearts are in the right place. It encourages me to work much harder to try to resolve the issues that are in the 32-recommendation report from the expert panel.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Minister of State. His passion and dedication to this area really shines and I know he will make a huge difference. It is needed. It is really positive that the €14.5 million budget was fully used by local authorities last year. It is very encouraging that we are on track to do the same again this year. I am really pleased that the expert review group is making such progress on so many of its recommendations. I commend the Minister of State on the pilot caravan loan scheme and it being rolled-out further next year.

The Minister of State mentioned a couple of times that data remains an issue. What plans are in place to resolve that? The Traveller identifier is in a similar area. Can the Minister of State update the committee on what role that will play? Is budget required for that?

The report sought a 50% increase in the funding allocation for the management and maintenance of Traveller-specific accommodation. What is likely to happen there? We all want to make sure these sites are as safe and homely as possible.

I know there have been many circulars on this issue but has the Minister of State written to local authorities outside of those and if so, is there anything he can share with the committee arising from that?

Deputy Peter Burke: One of my frustrations has been the lack of data. That is why one recommendation in the report was to have a specific Traveller identifier contained within social housing application forms. That would give us a better handle on what the requirements are from the Traveller community. A number of reports carried out, one of which was independently evaluated in County Mayo, suggest that not all members of the Traveller community want specific Traveller accommodation. Many want standard social housing. In the first instance, we have not captured data that specifically identifies the State's resources going into standard housing accommodation. We do not have a specific resource that indicates the demand com-

ing from the Traveller community. In the communities I visited and the halting sites I stood in, many Travellers told me that they want standard social housing provision. We need to determine what the exact requirement for that is. A number of these schemes are being pushed aggressively. In regard to circulars, in the last six months, I have twice written to the chief executives of the 31 local authorities - as recently as two weeks ago - reminding them of their responsibility to spend the capital budget to make conditions better for all vulnerable members of the Travelling community throughout the State. I have been as robust as possible within the remit of my powers in doing that.

The second part of the data will be obtained by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, in the upcoming census of next April. We need to see the Traveller community reflected in that data compilation. One can then judge the State's response to Traveller accommodation needs, and how it is providing services, against the demands of that community. We want to put the community first and then critically evaluate where we are in that regard. We are working hard with the CSO to ensure that, through the local authority network, all Traveller families are counted and that the data will indicate what the exact requirements are for particular families living in Traveller accommodation sites throughout this State. We are working hard to deliver that.

On the remediation works, I alluded to the audit of 250 sites for Covid preparedness that highlighted the need for a number of remedial schemes and works to be carried out during Covid to ensure safety in many of the Traveller accommodation halting sites. We were to the forefront in doing that work. The HSE led a process, throughout Covid, in identifying risks in the halting site network and we responded to requests for funding to make Traveller families as safe as possible through the pandemic. I acknowledge that members of the Traveller community responded well to that and have gained trust in us as we show them that we mean business in solving the problems encountered.

I know the local authority network comes in for a lot of criticism, but many of them are doing their best. However, we must acknowledge they need to do more. I am being honest and am to the forefront in my engagement with them to ensure that the greatest pressure is applied to where the need is most acute. Under the Act, they have responsibility in this area. I note the issue of extra staffing resources in the Custom House was raised. We must consider what our responsibilities in the Custom House are and what the larger stakeholder groups, throughout Government, responsibilities are. Our job is to ensure that the resources are put where they are most needed to resolved many of the blockages in this area.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I wish the Minister of State the best of luck. It is obvious that a lot of work has been done in this area. The Minister of State seems to be passionate about it and I hope he will implement what he has outlined. One of the sites in my constituency that the Minister of State visited earlier this year is Spring Lane. Some 30 years ago, they moved the site from the bottom of Spring Lane to the top of Spring Lane. The situation of this site sums up the way the Traveller community has been treated by successive Governments and local authorities in regard to housing. They put in ten bays where there were 16 families. From the outset, 30 years ago, there were six bays overcrowded and now there are more than 30 families on the site in horrendous conditions, as was evident from a recent report of the ombudsman, in regard to what the children on the site have to deal with. There were some good people in Cork City Council trying to manage and maintain this site. One of the biggest issues faced was resources. The management, maintenance and caretaking of these sites was not resourced. While I acknowledge what the Minister of State has outlined, I ask that he provide further information about increased resources in that regard. We are not managing the sites properly. The fact that

this site went from ten to more than 34 bays, with virtually no facilitates, goes to the heart of the problem. Of the 250 sites around the State, how many are actually managed properly? There is a duty of care and an onus on the local authorities to take responsibility for the management of these sites.

When I was a councillor, I was part of a group that was set up a number of years ago whereby the local Traveller community, the local residents of Ballyvolane, local councillors and officials, the HSE and the community garda used to come together. It was a great initiative because the Traveller community had its say, as did the local community. We were starting to work things out while working together. However, due to progress moving slowly, members of the Traveller community walked away because they felt it was a talking shop. Groups like this have an important part to play, but there is no point in attending meetings, coming up with policies and suggestions, if nothing happens.

Another example is St. Anthony's Park halting site in Hollyhill. It received major investment about seven or eight years ago - approximately €4 million was spent - which transformed that site. The problem now is that there is a community centre there that is never open, despite having spent the money to set up a brand new site. We know there are significant issues with mental health, suicide and education among members of the Traveller community, and with getting them involved with sports and the arts. A community centre would be a vital part in that.

There are many more issues I would like to raise with the Minister of State. I ask that he touches base with me on some of the issues I have raised, and hopefully we will work together. I have noticed that when the Traveller community and the local community come together, there are the best outcomes for everyone. It is in this regard that we should lead the way with the local authorities. However, if they do not have the funding and resources necessary, we will go nowhere quickly.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Gould for his kind and good wishes at the outset. I will be clear; I wish to be honest and open with the Cathaoirleach and members of the committee in that I do not have all the answers to this complex issue, but I assure them that I will do my best. I appreciate the guidance from the committee and feedback on the structures I have established. When I took on the role in November of being responsible for Traveller accommodation, I wanted to ensure the structures that reflect the needs of the Traveller community were put in place, through working with the local authorities and the Department, as equal representatives around the table, to chart a way through implementing the 32 recommendations contained in the report.

While I must be careful in what I say about the Ombudsman for Children's office, OCO, report referred to by the Deputy, I will make a few points on it. The OCO report, No End in Site, was a shocking indictment of the State, and we must be honest about that. It highlighted the extreme conditions that vulnerable people were living in, and that is something I do not want to see happen. As a father looking at his children, it makes one take a whole societal approach. In response to that, we approved a project worth €5.4 million, in April 2020, for Traveller-specific accommodation on the adjoining site. We supported the employment, through the Department with the local authority, of a mediator to get clear data from the residents on exactly what type of accommodation they want which will meet their needs. I visited the site and met them in person, and there is a varied response coming back. I wish to put on the record the respectful nature of members of the community, and the way they engaged with me was exemplary. We had a positive meeting with them and all the stakeholders in Cork. We need to liaise strongly and robustly with the local authority to ensure it will carry out what it says it will. It is currently

doing a health and safety audit on the site that will highlight a large number of gaps in regard to dangers that are ever-present as one walks across the site.

Vice Chairman: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Peter Burke: To make it clear, the Government, through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, has stated that funding is not an obstacle on this matter. I assure Deputy Gould about that if he is going to speak to his constituents. Funding is not an obstacle.

Vice Chairman: We are now in our second round of questioning and both Fine Gael and Sinn Féin have had a second slot. The next slot is for Fianna Fáil. I am conscious this is a joint committee and I can indicate to the room who I have waiting, given that some members have been here for the whole meeting but have not spoken at all. The next speakers will be Deputies Ó Cuív, Flaherty, Cathal Crowe and O'Donoghue and Senator Moynihan. Given that those speakers have not yet spoken, is the committee agreed to allow them to speak over the remainder of the meeting? Agreed.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I have no doubt about the Minister of State's sincerity in this regard and I also pay tribute to the work of a former Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, when he was in office. The concern is that this is still a problem for Travellers living in absolutely substandard accommodation. Whatever is the flaw in the whole system, we do not seem to have made much progress in 20 years. Over the past ten years we have had the Carrickmines tragedy, which was a massive national tragedy. We have had the report on Cork. We have a position where Travellers in my constituency were put on a temporary halting site and told they would be given proper permanent accommodation. Ten years later, they are on a halting site for which the local authority has had no planning permission for more than seven years. These families have been waiting for suitable permanent accommodation but they have not got it.

I have a fundamental question. We have all these reports but in each of these cases, there was a crisis on the ground and the system did not act. The Minister of State may talk about the local authority's responsibility in each case but who oversees the local authority not with a velvet glove but with an iron fist? In other words, if things are not happening, who will absolutely enforce the ordinary human rights of people living in properties owned by the local authorities? Until we answer that question, we will be writing reports until the cows come home and we will have tragedy after tragedy.

I was looking at some of the other contributions that will be made later. One of the challenges faced by people in local authority houses is that everything is decided for them, and it is even worse when they are Travellers. The benign idea is that we get the system to design what they want. If the Minister of State or I were to build a one-off rural house, we could decide what we want. If we bought a house, we could decide where we want to live and who we want to live with. It is a general principle but specifically with Travellers it is absolutely vital the community we propose to spend money on is central to what happens. Where people are involved in a process, it is much more likely to be respected and suitable for them.

We have spoken about percentages, specifically mentioning 45% for local authority housing and so on. Are there data on the percentage of homeless people in each local authority who come from this community, which comprises less than 1% of the population? My understanding is that in some of the local authorities the level is up to 50% of the total number of homeless people. They come from a very small minority in the community. Why is that? They find it

very hard to access the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme and private accommodation.

I could not give an ultimate decision between someone's standard form of housing and Traveller-specific housing. We could spend a long time on that this afternoon. I can guarantee one thing, though, and that is that nobody wants people to be homeless. That is absolutely the last resort. Very few Travellers would state HAP as a preference. A very small minority might prefer it but the vast majority do not see it as a permanent solution. We know 18% of them are in the rental accommodation scheme. Standard and Traveller-specific accommodation are two separate matters. There is also the question of the quality-specific accommodation.

With either standard housing or HAP there is another issue. Like with most humans, there is a strong bond of community in the Traveller community and they want to be near family. Not all Travellers belong to the same families, and we recognise there may be a rivalry between families. Nevertheless, they wish to be with their families in many cases. I get this all the time on a human level. I cannot understand, when we allocate houses, that it must be on a numbers game rather than asking whether the person fits into a community where he or she would be happy, have familial supports and be able to support parents in turn.

I could go on. I recognise the Minister of State's attention to this but Ministers come and Ministers go; the problem is the system seems to go on forever with the same failed policies.

Vice Chairman: I imagine this topic will be covered also in our second session, when we meet representatives of local authorities. As we are out of time for the slot I will go to the next speaker. The Minister of State might use some of his remaining time to answer some of those questions if possible.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister of State for attending. Like the previous speaker, I thank him for his efforts since taking office. I have slightly different take on some of the matters raised so please bear with me.

The first matter is the Traveller accommodation expert review report, published in July 2019. It was a 115-page document and within it was a series of high-level recommendations relating to the provision of Traveller accommodation in the State. I will hone in on one of those recommendations, specifically No. 4. It proposes to "Repeal the Trespass legislation, in particular as it applies to publicly owned land, until an appropriate network of transient provision as envisaged in the 1998 Act has been provided."

That is a crazy proposal and a massive overstretch in policy. It is political correctness gone mad. If this came to pass, we could potentially have encampments in hospital car parks, schoolyards, public parks and the list goes on. These examples are not hysterical or outlandish and there are many examples - too many - of illegal encampments on public property now. This proposal would, of course, serve to make them legal and make it impossible to move on illegal encampments.

We currently have an encampment at Sixmilebridge railway station in County Clare. The approach in this instance seems to be "Here we are, we have rocked up, house us". This is an illegal takeover of a public facility and, moreover, it amounts to leapfrogging of the housing waiting list, which is very unfair to other Traveller families and members of the settled community who have waited years to be housed. What is the current status of the recommendation I referred to? The answer to Traveller accommodation provision surely relates to the provision of transient sites and permanent accommodation and not tearing apart age-old trespassing laws.

A second matter I wish to raise concerns the colossal legal fees faced by local authorities in defending themselves in court on matters relating to Traveller accommodation. This year alone, Clare County Council spent €1.1 million defending legal actions taken against it by various individuals and bodies. It is a waste of public money that would be much better spent in providing accommodation, rather than lining the pockets of lawyers.

I should be clear that Clare County Council, an authority on which I had the honour of serving for 16 years, more than meets its legal obligations in providing Traveller accommodation. Very often, disputes arise because of irreconcilable differences between housing needs versus housing wants. If a local authority has offered suitable accommodation to a Traveller family, it should not be hauled before the courts. The Minister of State has a moral duty to protect local authorities from these actions.

We must provide suitable accommodation, both permanent and transient, for Traveller families, and we have a moral and legal obligation to do so. When it comes to dismantling trespassing laws or expending fortunes on legal actions, we also need to have a good look at ourselves.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Crowe for his observations, and Deputy Ó Cuív, who is very committed to this area.

We have made significant progress in the past year. One can look at the doubling of the maintenance allowance; an increase in the caretaker refund through the local authority network right up to 75%; Cena, the local authority AHB can now draw down 100% of funding from the capital assistance programme, which were again changes that-----

Vice Chairman: My apologies, Minister of State-----

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Is the recommendation to demolish trespassing going to happen? That is all I want to know.

Deputy Peter Burke: If the Deputy will allow me, I will do my best to answer . There was one area I wish to respond to for Deputy Ó Cuív on who is responsible for the local authority network. Let us be clear and honest because the members are the guardians of the local authorities up and down the country.

On Deputy's Crowe's comments, it can be seen in my opening statement that I specifically referred to the transient sites and having an all-island approach in trying to respond to them.

On the trespass recommendation of the expert report, which was referred to by the Deputy, that is currently with the programme board. It has to liaise with the Department of Justice on the eviction notices and the 24 hours. Putting a cap, stall or moratorium on such evictions was one of the legislative provisions the Dáil voted on in emergency time. That did happen.

Vice Chairman: I thank the Minister of State and I am determined-----

Deputy Peter Burke: I do not want to overreach as to what the programme board are doing so I will leave it to them to come back to me.

Vice Chairman: ----- to protect the speaking time of the final three speakers. I will move on now to Deputy Flaherty.

Deputy Peter Burke: Absolutely.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I commend my constituency colleague on his work to date. He has great enthusiasm for this issue, particularly for the Traveller community.

The OCO report was welcome and it has shone a harrowing light on the challenges that many in the Traveller community are facing. We all agree that our transient and halting site accommodation is substandard and has to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Returning to a point made by Deputy Gould, halting sites need to be future-proofed. There is a *familia* dimension to the Traveller culture and six to eight bay halting sites simply do not work. Communities may not like it but in reality a halting site needs to be future-proofed and it has to be there for subsequent generations.

I agree with Deputy Ó Cuív that HAP and RAS do not work either. They do not sit well with the Traveller culture, which is very much a culture of a home for life, and that does not fit or feel well with either of those two payments. There is probably a case to be made, therefore, to consider a Traveller-specific rental support scheme.

The key point in the report and in the Minister of State's opening statement is not fully addressed in any of the accompanying documentation, which is that 45% of the Traveller community are housed in local authority AHBs. I am not seeing where any of the additional supports are coming to local authorities to support those agencies. I come from a county where we have the highest percentage of Traveller population *per capita* and we have the fastest growing Traveller population aged under 15 in the country. We are very proud of our Traveller community in Longford and they enhance and enrich our local community but Longford County Council and other local county councils would be well-served with additional funding, which would enable them to provide additional support workers to enhance their Traveller accommodation committee and to put staff and boots on the ground to assist these communities.

It is not often that I agree with Deputy Gould but I concur with him that we should bring the best scenarios to the Traveller community while respecting their culture to see how this can enhance the community and bring along the Traveller community together with the rest of an estate. In many instances at the moment, I am afraid that our Traveller tenants on our local authority estates feel marginalised and that is a slight on us as housing authorities, which we need to address. I do not see it addressed in anything that the Minister of State has laid out in front of us today.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank and acknowledge the work done by Deputy Flaherty in County Longford on this issue. Like me, he is very familiar with this issue. As I said at the beginning, we are trying to get completely accurate data so that we can understand the demand and where it lies in respect of the requirements of the Traveller community. That will give us a better understanding in how to respond to this significant challenge. The Deputy is correct to reference the *per capita* population of members of the Traveller community in Longford who certainly enrich the area. We have significant work to do to support this community through the local authority network.

Since I became Minister of State in November, we have given quite significant additional support. Again, as I pointed out earlier, the capital budget next year has been increased by 25% on 2020. This is significant work and funding which I want to have spent. I want County Longford to ensure that it spends its allocation and, working with the Deputy, we can both ensure that it does that.

If members have specific areas or sites of concern in their constituencies, I ask them to let me know about them. I will try to resolve them and to apply pressure to try to ensure that better standards are maintained within them which is also very important.

Vice Chairman: I call on Deputy O'Donoghue. I apologise to him as I should have called him in an earlier slot but I inadvertently called another member.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank the Vice Chairman and the Minister of State. Like other speakers, I know that the Minister of State is very passionate about this issue. He said that money is not the issue. Deputy Ó Cuív and others said there have been 20 years of this but that nothing has changed. The Minister of State said then that many inroads have been made in the past 12 months.

I will talk about Limerick. We have large numbers of Traveller communities within Limerick and I know members of many of them. There are some, however, that I do not know. The reason for this is that they are from different Traveller communities. They could be from the UK and have moved here. People with different cultures and from different societies within the Traveller community have moved here and are not from Ireland at all. The problem I find is that when officials are searching for a location for a Traveller community, these communities will state if they have an issue with another Traveller community. They seem to tell the local authorities and everybody that there is an issue within a family of feuding.

Recently in a town in Limerick, and committee members may have seen this, four different Traveller families had a feud. If money is not the issue, why have we not got people who can liaise with those who have a different cultural background? If there is a difference within their cultures, can we not try to work with them rather than having a feud happening where people from all different sides are brought into a community and it causes complete mayhem?

I grew up with members of the Traveller community coming into our home. These were the most skilful people, the tinsmiths, going back to my father's time in 1911 when my father was able to tell me the stories of the tradespeople who were coming. We now have a different era and culture and there are so many different types of culture within the Traveller community. We must work with the different cultures to ensure that things like this do not happen.

There can be feuds within every community but when four different Traveller communities are coming together to feud in a place, it is not good. There is no issue in our area between the residents and the Traveller community. They all integrate, get on fine and work together. The issue we are finding at the moment relates to the different cultures within the Traveller communities. This issue had been identified before these Traveller community members were housed and were put on a caravan site. We now have an issue, however, where the councils are not prepared and do not have the staff to go out to do the liaison to help these people to get on. We all want to get on, no matter what culture one is, but we cannot have things like this happening in the future where other people's lives are being put at risk.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Vice Chairman and also thank Deputy O'Donoghue for his comments on the issues in his own particular constituency. I do not want to overemphasise the work we have done because I fully understand that there are still vulnerable families living in substandard conditions right across this State, which is something none of us want to see. We have a mountain to climb, which will require engagement from everyone.

In the context of the issue the Deputy raises, there is a network of social workers and liaison

officers throughout the 31 local authority areas. I am saying that there is no money in the Traveller accommodation budget. The Deputy is referring to a cross-government approach where one is reaching into An Garda Síochána, the Department of Justice and other State agencies which, I might add, need to step up to the mark in responding and engaging with communities and trying to avert any antisocial behaviour such as that to which the Deputy referred. That is the last thing any of us, including the Deputy and his constituents in County Limerick, want to see or contend with. It gives everyone a bad name and leaves us all with an even greater challenge to resolve this crisis. I absolutely understand where the Deputy is coming from.

Senator Rebecca Moynihan: I will spend most of my time letting the Minister of State answer questions. In the past while, we have seen a number of people making speeches about their experiences and those experiences being applied to a whole community. In response to Deputy Crowe's remarks on trespassing and transient sites, if we provided transient sites, there would not be a need for people to trespass on unofficial halting sites. That is the key issue. It is also a recommendation. When one calls it an overreach, it is up to the Department as to whether it will accept that recommendation. The Minister of State addressed that point adequately. I also pay tribute to the approach of one of the Deputy's Fianna Fáil colleagues, Deputy Ó Cuív, for his open-minded, human rights-based and passionate approach to the issue of Traveller accommodation. A conversation with Deputy Ó Cuív could enlighten some people on this committee.

One of the recommendations was for an independent national Traveller authority. What is the status of that and are there any plans to get it up and operational? The Land Development Agency, LDA, is taking on a significant role in housing delivery and State sites, outside of local authority sites. Some of us in Opposition in the Seanad, tried, by means of amendments, to include Traveller accommodation in the remit of the LDA. What responsibility will the LDA have in this area? Will any targets be given to it in respect of the inclusion of Traveller accommodation in some of the sites they have? I am disappointed that Traveller accommodation was not addressed in the national development plan, which was released to much fanfare. I say that knowing the Minister of State is committed, open-minded and progressive regarding this matter. This is not a criticism of the Minister of State, but it is a pity the national development plan had no reference to it at all.

Deputy Peter Burke: With regard to the one overarching agency, the programme board has decided to progress with 18 of the 32 recommendations in the first instance. These are getting acute priority. That is approximately 56% of the recommendations from the expert group. It has taken those on board, in its wisdom. The Traveller community wanted additional representation on the board to ensure equality and a round-table discussion. I acceded to that request immediately. I am being led by the board and the independent chair on the implementation. The agency is on its radar but it is not on the immediate priority of its work. I will be getting timelines in respect of the 18 recommendations. The board has had five meetings since March and has only been established for six months. With regard to the LDA and the multi-annual budget of €4 billion in the Department and Housing for All, I acted robustly to ensure that Traveller accommodation was included in the capital plan. Our commitment, as a State, to resolve the issues therein is very clear. The LDA will be acting on policy from our Department and providing accommodation for our Traveller community.

Vice Chairman: That concludes the final slot. I thank the Minister of State and his officials for attending. The members of both committees look forward to continuing this conversation with the CCMA and members of the Irish Traveller movement. We will go into private session

for three minutes to allow for a changeover and we will then commence the second session with our external guests.

The joint committee went into private session at 4.35 p.m. and resumed in public session at 4.43 p.m.

Senator John Cummins took the Chair.

Expert Group Review of Traveller Accommodation: Discussion

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I welcome the following witnesses to the committee. From the Irish Traveller Movement, we are joined by Mr. Bernard Joyce, director, and Ms Emily Murtagh, national Traveller policy officer. From the County and City Management Association, CCMA, we are joined by Mr. Eugene Cummins, CEO of Roscommon County Council; Ms Catherine Keenan, director of service for housing in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council; and Mr. Maurice Manning, director of service for housing in Cork County Council.

I will first ask for opening statements from the Irish Traveller Movement, followed by CCMA. Members will then be invited to address their questions. I ask that members confine their questions to five minutes, including time for answers. If possible, we might get to another round of questions at the end. I call Mr. Joyce to make his opening statement.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: The Irish Traveller Movement would like to thank the committee for the invitation to cover matters relating to Traveller accommodation, particularly the Expert Review on Traveller Accommodation. Before I continue, I would like to take a minute to remember that on Saturday, 10 October 2015, a blaze swept through a temporary site at Glenamuck Road in Carrickmines. This was the deadliest such disaster in the country since the Stardust fire. The vulnerability of Travellers was posed by substandard, overcrowded, shared accommodation, which still effects over 1,700 Traveller families six years later. This issue has not been addressed and remains without the urgency that is required to bring about the necessary changes. We owe it to them and to every other Traveller on this island to implement in full the expert report recommendations. Of course, I welcome the earlier contribution of the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, to the committee today. However, there is an urgency required to reform a broken system that ultimately failed our community.

We are in a national Traveller accommodation crisis in Ireland. This is not of our making. Our children live in some of the worst conditions in the world. Despite legislative protection under the Traveller Accommodation Act, a low estimate shows that more than 1,700 Traveller families are living in inadequate, unsafe conditions stacked against their health, education, employment and life opportunities, below basic human rights standards. Some 39% of Travellers live in overcrowded accommodation, 24% live in severe housing deprivation and 5% live without piped water or sewerage supplies, according to the 2021 report by Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, and Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, on monitoring adequate housing in Ireland. In some local authority areas, for example Galway City, Traveller families make up 50% of the homeless families while accounting for just 1% of the overall population.

The budget for Traveller accommodation was spent in full last year, which we welcomed.

However, it is important to note that €4.4 million of that budget was spent on basic emergency provisions to mitigate against Covid-19, including water tanks and portaloos, and not on new developments. In 2020, seven group houses were built or refurbished. At this rate, with no ramping up of Traveller accommodation, the crisis will worsen. There is no end in sight. I remind the committee of the €72 million that went underspent from 2008 to 2019. This was one of the primary causes of the current Traveller accommodation crisis. The lack of delivery and underspends have been highlighted internationally through the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, CERD, and the Council of Europe, as well as nationally, most recently in the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission's equality reviews, and by the Ombudsman's for Children Office.

The Ombudsman for Children's Office, in its investigation this year of one local authority halting site, produced a report called No End in Site. It found that: "There was a failure to consider the best interests of children, including those with additional needs, and to ensure that children living on the site enjoy a safe, suitable standard of accommodation". It is also found that: "There was a failure to comply with and implement the minimum requirements of the Traveller Accommodation Programme ,TAP, which places a statutory duty on local authorities to meet the accommodation needs of Travellers to address the significant inequalities facing them." One child was quoted in the report as saying: "it's like an abandoned place that people forgot about; it's like we're forgotten; we feel like garbage". Another child, aged 12, said: "walking up to school you see all the rats. They would be running up and down the walls of the trailer." In context, there are 138 people on this site who are using toilets and washing facilities that were designed for only 40 people. There was evidence of children sleeping on makeshift beds that were cramped into the living-dining areas. The report highlighted the unreliability and lack of facilities such as heating, lighting and water. This site is by no means unique. Similar testimonies have been reflected by Travellers for decades throughout the country. These reports shine a light on the living experiences of our community.

The Traveller Accommodation Act was introduced so that local authorities would have a statutory obligation to plan every five years for the accommodation needs of Travellers in their own county. The ITM's own analysis of all 31 authorities' TAPs found a repeated pattern of a lack of planning for future population growth, programme periods with inadequate targets, a lack of planning for Traveller-specific accommodation and identification and zoning of sites for developments, and inconsistent approaches to data collection and needs analysis. Our analysis also found an overreliance on the housing assistance payment, HAP, for delivery. The discrimination faced by Travellers in the private rental sector means that HAP is an inadequate option. It further lengthens the time spent by Travellers in emergency accommodation, in hidden homelessness, or in severely overcrowded conditions.

A 2017 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, report found that Travellers were 22 times more likely to experience discrimination in the private rental sector. The Residential Tenancies Board found in a 2014 survey that 82% of landlords surveyed were unwilling to rent properties to Travellers despite the Equal Status Act. One example of this kind of discrimination arose recently, where a Traveller family managed to secure accommodation to exit homelessness. The letting agent that was due to rent to the family was then harassed by local anti-Traveller residents and subsequently withdrew from the proposed lease. The Covid-19 pandemic has only further highlighted the inequalities that we always knew existed. Travellers have been extremely vulnerable to Covid infection with analysis showing they were 2.6 times more likely to be affected than the general population, exacerbated by poor living conditions. Despite the available Government support to mitigate these risks, local authority implementa-

tion was inconsistent despite the evident and disproportionate outbreaks in the community.

When we look to solutions to the crisis, the Traveller accommodation expert review's 32 recommendations provide a roadmap to real progress. We welcome the work that has been done so far to implement the 32 recommendations of the expert review to address the issues we have outlined. The Irish Traveller Movement is a member of both the programme board for its implementation and the national Traveller accommodation consultative committee, NTACC. However, more than two years after the review's publication and governmental commitment to its implementation, we are now concerned about the rate of progress. Some 18 of the recommendations are due to be completed in 2021, while most recent progress reports do not demonstrate this is likely to be fulfilled. No subgroups have been established for any of the recommendations to facilitate consultations with Traveller organisations.

The Government's Housing for All plan commits to prioritising the implementation of the expert review recommendations, however there are no targets included for Traveller accommodation in the plan and there are no timelines attached for the implementation of the 32 recommendations. The provision of targets, timelines and sufficient resourcing for each of the recommendations, ensure what has been promised is possible, that those responsible are held accountable and ensure that success is measurable. We ask the committee to ensure that these targets, timelines and sufficient resources are in place and clearly outlined to ensure this accountability. All 32 of these recommendations are important. However, we would like to particularly focus on three of them. They are: the establishment of a national Traveller accommodation authority to independently monitor and oversee the planning and delivery of Traveller-specific accommodation; the repeal of the trespass legislation to end the criminalisation of nomadism on this island and the trauma of evictions; and to remedy Ireland's breach of Article 16 of the European social charter in relation to eviction procedures. We must also circumvent Part 8 of the planning process to remove a key barrier to delivery. We have sent a briefing document to committee members and we can take questions. We thank members for their time and consideration.

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I thank Mr. Joyce. I now invite Mr. Cummins to make his presentation on behalf of the County and City Management Association, CCMA.

Mr. Eugene Cummins: On behalf of the CCMA, I thank the committee for its invitation. I look forward to assisting the committee in its deliberations on the review of Traveller accommodation by the expert group. The CCMA welcomes the reference to the implementation of the recommendations of the expert review group in Housing for All and recognises that Traveller accommodation is a priority that needs to be addressed. Local authorities are governed by the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 and have general responsibility for the provision of housing for adults who cannot afford to provide it for themselves, including the provision of Traveller accommodation at local level. This is done through the adoption and implementation of five-year Traveller accommodation programmes, TAPs. Each November, local authorities undertake an annual estimate of accommodation of Travellers, which assists in drawing up the TAPs. The Traveller accommodation expert review group was established in 2018 to review the Traveller Accommodation Act 1998 and other legislation that impacts on the provision and delivery of accommodation for Travellers. In advance of the finalisation of the report, the CCMA met and discussed the role of local government with the expert group. The report, which was published in July 2019, has 32 recommendations that can be broken down into four categories: delivery reflecting need; planning; capacity; and funding governance.

The CCMA broadly welcomes the report and is represented on the programme board established to drive the delivery of the recommendations of the report. The programme board has met a number of times since its establishment and has agreed a work programme for this year. The CCMA is committed to ensuring that these recommendations are prioritised and, through the programme board, will drive the priority projects currently being advanced regarding the CSO data, which is very important. The CCMA welcomes the current engagement by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Housing and the CSO in providing better representation of the Traveller community from census 2022. While this will inform policy, consideration will need to be given to research that has been carried out by other groups locally and nationally. The CCMA further agrees that a nationwide survey of Traveller demographics is important and that this could be performed by local authority staff in addition to, or in place of, the annual count. The CCMA believes that local authorities are best placed to provide this information, given their local knowledge of Traveller families, which enables more accurate reporting than could be provided by an independent body.

In terms of the Traveller identifier, the CCMA welcomes and supports the recommendation to formally record ethnicity on housing applications going forward. This will help to identify the housing needs of Travellers and assist local authorities to collate data on waiting lists relating to housing support and the types of accommodation sought. It should be noted that local authorities are currently only detailing information on social housing tenants and social housing applicants where ethnicity has been declared by them, as being members of the Traveller community. It should be highlighted that it is incumbent on the applicant, if he or she wants, to identify himself or herself as a Traveller. In the absence of any such declaration, local authorities are not classifying any person as being a member of the Traveller community. The CCMA believes that in order to implement an ethnic identifier,a whole-of-government approach is required as this complex issue stretches across many strategies and Departments.

Regarding the funding allocation scheme, the removal of the allocation of specific budgets to individual local authorities is a welcome development. This has enabled local authorities to apply for and draw down funds at any time during the year.

On the management and maintenance of Traveller-specific accommodation, the 50% increase in funding announced by the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, for the management and maintenance of Traveller-specific accommodation earlier this year was welcomed by the CCMA. This allows local authorities to better utilise funding. It should be noted that, increasingly, greater expenditure from the maintenance budgets is being used to clean up increased levels of dumping on all sites. The CCMA does not agree with the recommendation that the role of the caretaker for Traveller-specific accommodation needs to be reviewed. The CCMA firmly believes that the role of the caretaker and estate manager should be kept separate, as they are two very distinct roles with a potential conflict of interest. The estate manager role is currently complex and will not benefit from further responsibilities.

The CCMA endorses the research on good practice on the design of Traveller-specific accommodation, including planning, design, management and maintenance of halting sites, as it will inform local authorities on future societal changes. The CCMA has already engaged with the Department on the design of Traveller-specific accommodation and looks forward to updated guidance for both local authorities and approved housing bodies, AHBs, in the design of Traveller-specific accommodation.

The all-Ireland approach to transient sites is broadly welcomed. The CCMA would highlight that the current legislation was implemented to curb the unlawful occupation of publicly

owned lands. The CCMA wishes to highlight that the legislation is there to protect the rights of all and repealing it is an imposition on the rights of the entire community. It should be noted that our priority is to provide suitable permanent accommodation in the first instance.

The recommendation to report on the delivery of new Traveller-specific accommodation as part of the progress reporting under Housing for All is welcomed. In terms of the local authority role, the CCMA fully supports the progression of the projects as identified in the work programme for 2021 and is actively engaged with the NTACC and the various stakeholders. I will take this opportunity to provide some clarification from a local government perspective on some other areas identified in the report. Local authorities provide a range of accommodation options to the Traveller community, including Traveller-specific accommodation. Accommodation is provided by local authorities through a range of options, such as standard local authority or approved housing body housing, group housing and halting sites. Accommodation is provided through subsidisation via the housing assistance payment and the rental accommodation scheme.

The option to transfer from Traveller-specific accommodation to standard housing, inclusive of private rental properties, is available to Travellers. Travellers can apply on both the standard housing list and Traveller-specific accommodation list, availing of whichever offer comes first. They, as is the case for all applicants on the standard housing list, can then choose up to three geographical areas of preference. Tenants can specify this preference, and this would be known, recorded and monitored by the social work team. They would also make such recommendations to the relevant officer, should accommodation become available. The CCMA notes with concern that the report fails to acknowledge that the demand for Traveller-specific accommodation is diminishing, especially among the younger generations, whose preference is not to live in halting site accommodation and who are increasingly seeking standard housing and group schemes.

A number of challenges arise from the reports. Where Traveller-specific accommodation is proposed, a significant amount of consultation with Traveller families and local communities is required to build trust, design the best housing solutions and create favourable conditions to facilitate the planning process. Such projects take additional time and significant resources. These projects are not suitable for external design teams as good communications need to be established and maintained in order to build confidence and trust with the Traveller families and the local communities. This is a complex area that requires significant collaboration with all stakeholders. It is not just a housing issue. The CCMA believes the recommendations around Part 8 proposals could lead to serious issues locally for local authorities which must engage openly and transparently with communities. The CCMA recommends that expert legal advice is sought for the benefit and protection of all stakeholders in this matter.

The recommendation that chief executives use emergency powers to bypass elected members could be viewed as undermining the planning and democratic process, which underpins all aspects of local and central government policy. This is an area that warrants legal opinion and careful consideration, especially in light of the potential for judicial review proceedings.

While there are some interesting proposals in the report, the CCMA wishes to highlight that some of the key reasons the delivery of Traveller accommodation is problematic do not seem to be fully considered. It is important to consider the potential reasons behind objections to the development of Traveller accommodation. Traveller accommodation sites tend to be associated with increased levels of crime, violence, anti-social behaviour, illegal dumping and burning, as well as with social issues such as addiction and early school leaving. These issues need to

be tackled alongside the housing issues. It should be noted as well that compatibility in the allocation of accommodation to Traveller families brings additional complexity. The CCMA welcomes a collaborative approach with all the relevant stakeholders to overcome some of these obstacles.

It should be highlighted that while complying with Government policy, the practical approach taken by each local authority on the delivery of Traveller-specific accommodation varies. This variance is necessary to reflect local circumstances and, from experience, stems from a desire to look proactively after the housing support needs of Traveller families, many of whom have vulnerabilities.

The CCMA recognises the need for greater co-ordination among State service providers such as the HSE. Providing more and improved Traveller-specific accommodation is also a priority locally and nationally. The CCMA welcomes the continuation of the collaborative approach by all stakeholders in recent months. The CCMA is working with the Department on the development of the caravan loan scheme, which is being piloted in four local authorities. We welcome the report of the independent review of the role of social workers. There is a need for a more sustainable funding model for the retention and expansion of the social work service. There is also a need to reflect the wider role of the social worker within the housing department and across the local authority in general. The CCMA continues to work with the national Traveller accommodation consultative committee to help drive the expert review group recommendations. The CCMA will endeavour to work with the programme board to progress actions through ongoing engagement with the CCMA housing, building and land use committee.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I thank Mr. Joyce and Mr. Cummins for their presentations. Mr. Cummins is the CEO in my county of Roscommon. I was a local authority member there for many years. He and his team seem to have a very good approach to settling Travellers in various parts of the county, which is quite successful. In most situations it works out without conflict. I also acknowledge Mr. Joyce's contribution. I acknowledge what he is saying and what he is trying to do. It is important that we have him here and listen to his contribution.

I will keep this quite brief. It is good to see that the CCMA is interested in continuing to work to progress this issue to make sure that Travellers are treated with respect and dignity. They should be given a fair chance at housing. A lot of work behind the scenes between elected members and executives in some local authorities means this works very successfully. I accept that there are probably other local authorities where it does not work as well. I want to put one thing very strongly on the record. We must eliminate the conditions in which some Travellers still live. It is horrifying to most of us that in some parts of the country people can live in appalling conditions. I am sure everybody associated with the committee and the people joining us online would acknowledge this.

I have several short questions. I welcome the fact that the CCMA is stating clearly that the removal of the allocation of specific budgets to individual local authorities is a welcome development. The CCMA has stated that this will enable local authorities to apply for and draw down funds at any time during the year. I would like to ask Mr. Joyce and those representing Travellers how they find the level of accommodation their people move in to. I presume it has to be up to a certain standard. Do they have any complaints in this regard?

I want to mention a specific case. I will not say where exactly in the country it was. It was not in County Roscommon. A family was living in rented accommodation and receiving the housing assistance payment. I have to say they were outstanding tenants. The owner of the

house decided very generously to sell the house to the local authority in this particular county for a very reasonable fee because the family had been there for many years. I would say it was way below the market value. The family was offered housing in a local town but they were worried about a drug issue in the town, particularly in the estate to which they were being moved. They did not want their children in that environment.

In the particular county I am speaking about, and it is not County Roscommon, there was quite an amount of money in the Traveller accommodation account. I found a reluctance in the local authority to engage with the couple. I pointed out that money was available in the budget for this. The local authority felt that because the couple had been offered housing in a local town that they should have taken it. My view in cases like that, where a family are settled for quite a number of years and want to remain there, in the rural part of that area, where the children and the parents were very much part of the local community, and all that the house needed once it was purchased was an extra room and upgrading of the sanitary facilities, is that we should be very strong and that we should try to accommodate people like that. The reluctance to do that was a disappointment.

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I am conscious that the answers are supposed to be within the five-minute slot. I will allow latitude to Mr. Joyce and Mr. Cummins to respond but, to be fair to all members, I ask them to be mindful so we can get everyone in.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I apologise.

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): That is fine. I did not make it clear before the Senator spoke. I call Mr. Joyce and then Mr. Cummins.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I ask Senator Murphy to repeat the first question as I did not hear it correctly.

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): It concerned the quality of the accommodation that your community has experienced. It is a general question.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: In the presentation I gave, I highlighted the poor, substandard and overcrowded accommodation in which something like 1,700 families are currently living. That is not satisfactory. That particular issue has not happened overnight but has been in place for the last 20 years and, in some cases, prior to the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998. The legislation and the framework that is currently there have not been fully implemented in the spirit in which they should have been implemented. Of course, there are obviously examples of good quality accommodation across some areas of the country but we are a lacking that level of standard.

The report of the Ombudsman for Children's Office shone a light on the situation where high numbers of children are living in some of the worst conditions in the world, not only in Ireland, yet we are here and people seem to think it is not a crisis. It is not acceptable. We cannot stand over it and that is why we are here today. It is why we have been advocating and campaigning, first, for legislative change and, second, for the recommendations of the report to be implemented in full. The reality is we just do not know. The people we believe to be responsible for implementing that are absolutely failing our community and the system itself is completely broken, so we need to see radical changes. The solutions are there and it is the political will and commitment to deliver that are needed. Nobody wants to be living in these conditions where, honestly, children find themselves presenting to their GP and, in some cases,

being hospitalised because of conditions that are just not acceptable.

In terms of the budgets, I heard the Minister of State say earlier there is no issue with the budgets. If there is no issue, why are people living in these conditions?

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I would imagine we will get an opportunity to address the budgetary matters through other questions. I ask Mr. Cummins to give a brief reply on the point Senator Murphy raised on the moving of a family.

Mr. Eugene Cummins: First, no child should live in conditions like that, and I want to be very clear about that. Regardless of where they come from, whether it is Syria or a halting site, no child should live like that.

On the situation we find ourselves in, and I made reference to it in the presentation, these are very complex social issues and there are many reasons all of this might happen. There are quite a few people who are responsible for all of this, including the issues surrounding housing, and that includes members of the Travelling community and any other community, including the settled community.

In regard to the specific incident that Senator Murphy referenced, I am not familiar with that. I know that, over the years, in the various local authorities I have worked in, there are reasons behind all of these issues and they need to be addressed and examined. However, I cannot speak specifically on that. As Senator Murphy said, it was not something that happened in Roscommon.

I want to finish on the specific question by saying that no child should live like that. There are many people responsible for this situation and, from listening to the earlier sessions, it is not all down to the local authority. There are choices to be made as well and there are reasons accommodation cannot be provided at times, although it does not excuse a child living in circumstances like that.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I want to start in the same way that I started with the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, and that is by expressing my extreme frustration. I think the Minister of State misunderstood me because my frustration predates his taking up of his role. We have been discussing these things since 2017, since the Housing Agency report which highlighted the enormous failures both of central government and local government to implement their own Traveller accommodation programmes. We have had an expert group with 32 recommendations on the table for two and a half years. Many of us in this committee struggled with those recommendations. In fact, I think that for all of us, from all parties, particularly when it came to the proposed changes to planning law and land transfers - Part 8 and section 183 - our gut was not to support those because we have seen far too many powers taken away from local authorities. However, all of us, unanimously, at the end of a detailed consideration of that report in the previous Oireachtas realised that, in the absence of any other proposal, those recommendations had to be implemented as a matter of urgency or things were going to get worse. I have been trying to get the Minister of State, both through parliamentary questions and also today, to give me a straight answer as to why those measures are not in the legislative programme.

It is very disappointing that Eugene is restating the County and City Management Association's position, which is really reluctance to embrace those changes. If he has a better alternative, that is great and he can present it to us, but I do not think he has. Until we tackle those issues, then both the quality of the accommodation and the volume of accommodation issues

are not going to get addressed.

I also think the list of issues that Eugene said-----

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I ask the Deputy to speak through the Chair when addressing members.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I am addressing the witness directly and I can do that, with the greatest of respect to the Chair.

Eugene, I am also very concerned-----

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I would appreciate it if the Deputy would use the proper title for members of the committee also.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Eugene is not a member of the committee. He is an external member of the CCMA.

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): My apologies. I thought you were referring to Senator Eugene Murphy.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I am sure the good Senator would not mind me calling him Eugene. We are on very good terms. I am talking to the witness.

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): My apologies.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is Eugene Cummins from the CCMA. I think Mr. Cummins threw out a list of issues there as part of the reason Traveller accommodation can be very difficult. I have 11 very large Traveller-specific sites in my constituency and I deal with these issues every day. The one issue he did not mention, which is part of the problem, is prejudice. We have to get real about this. We have talked about this on a cross-party basis for a long time. We all worked with the last Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, who did a wonderful job to get the expert group report to where it was, but either we fully implement all of that report as a matter of urgency or we just stop wasting our time, saying we do not want children to live in these appalling conditions but that we are not willing to implement the recommendations of the report that is in front of us.

I have two questions. Can Mr. Joyce give us a little more information about his concern that the 32 recommendations of the working group are not going to be implemented? He mentioned the 18 but there are also the others.

Can Mr. Cummins give us an indication of what percentage of the Traveller accommodation programme in each of the local authorities that are composite are actually being implemented? Yes, more money was spent last year but a lot of it was not spent on the delivery of new accommodation or refurbishment of existing accommodation, and it was spent on Covid emergency measures. We are now a year or two into the Traveller accommodation programmes, TAPs. How well are we doing from Mr. Cummins's assessment in the CCMA?

Mr. Eugene Cummins: First, there is a big difference between social issues that are real and existing and prejudice that is perceived.

In regard to the question, the TAPs are implemented, for the most part, right across the board. In many instances, almost without exception, there are very good documented reasons

the Traveller accommodation programme cannot be delivered, be that Part 8 provision not coming through or other issues, including Traveller families not wanting to leave their homes while they are being renovated.

On Part 8, the local authorities will do what they always do, that is, implement the law. If it is changed, we will implement it. I reject the attempt to transfer the blame for all aspects of this to the local authorities. The local authorities will implement the law, as they always do.

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): The next speaker is Senator Seery Kearney.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: May I respond to the question from Deputy Ó Broin?

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I thought the Deputy's question was to a direct question to Mr. Cummins.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It was also directed to Mr. Joyce.

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I will give Mr. Joyce an opportunity to respond to that question when he is responding to Senator Seery Kearney.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I am happy to yield my time to give Mr. Joyce the opportunity to respond. I was merely going to speak about the No End In Sight report. I am fairly confident Mr. Joyce is more than capable of addressing that. I addressed my question to the Minister of State. I am happy to yield my time to allow Mr. Joyce the opportunity to speak.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I thank Senator Seery Kearney. Mr. Cummins's statement said there is a perceived view relating to racism. That is not correct. Within those types of statements there is an implicitness in terms of the institutionalised racism that has led us to this situation where children are living in some worst conditions in the world. Yet, there is no acknowledgement of the living experience of Travellers in this country. It is no wonder Travellers are calling for an independent agency to deliver Traveller accommodation. If local authorities cannot deliver, they should not be given responsibility for the provision of culturally appropriate accommodation.

We are not here to rehash the issues. Travellers are living the issues. We want to see solutions in terms of the delivery of culturally appropriate accommodation on this island. I cannot sit here and talk about the appalling conditions in which Travellers are living. The people responsible for the delivery of accommodation are the same people who are blocking that accommodation. As an Irish Traveller, I take personal offence at that. The OCO report highlights how Traveller children feel they are being forgotten and left behind. I do not know what part of the world people here are living in. If you go to Cork or to any Traveller site in this country, you will see the substandard, inhumane conditions in which Travellers are living. I ask the chief executive of the County and City Management Association, Mr. Cummins, and others to do that. I am appalled to hear the type of commentary I have heard today. It does nothing in terms of relationships or confidence in regard to the delivery of culturally appropriate accommodation. I am really angry about the comment made earlier by Mr. Cummins. I ask him to withdraw it. The evidence is there that Travellers experience discrimination in every aspect of Irish society. That has been said time and again. The commentary highlights the massive differences between the relationship between the local authorities and the Traveller community.

I appreciate Senator Seery Kearney giving me the opportunity to express that point.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I would add to that and say there is a settled privilege going on that requires that members of the Traveller community speak out about their lived experiences. We see this across other groups. Last week, at the Joint Committee on Disability Matters, we heard of an ability privilege. We need to hear the lived experiences of people. This report is horrific, as are the statistics in regard to Traveller suicide. Across all of the demographics, the statistics in regard to Travellers are much higher *per capita* than for any other group in society. That is appalling. It behoves us as a committee, and as a Parliament, to do everything we can to facilitate and speak on behalf of Travellers. I am aware Ms Murtagh would like to come in.

Ms Emily Murtagh: I echo the Senator's remarks. If it is not a matter that is deeply embedded or deeply related to discrimination, why then is the issue of Traveller accommodation one of the biggest areas in respect of which we have been criticised internationally by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and an area we have been found to be in breach of Article 16 of the European Social Charter? Why also do 30 of 31 equality reviews that have been published so far by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission relate to the delivery of the Traveller-specific accommodation and accommodation for Travellers generally? Those reports highlight independently the level of discrimination that is faced by Travellers. As stated by Mr. Joyce, Travellers are 22 times more likely to experience discrimination in the private rental sector. These are all evidenced by the volume of calls we receive each day from Travellers throughout the country who are struggling to find a home for their families owing to the discrimination they face in the private rental sector and in trying to access Traveller-specific accommodation in their local authority area.

The delivery of Traveller accommodation programmes, TAPs, was mentioned. The 2017 report referenced by Deputy Ó Broin found that only 68% of the planned Traveller-specific accommodation was built over the period analysed by that report. In its last Traveller accommodation programme, Dublin City Council has a new build target of more than 100, but no new units were built over the programme timeframe. There is huge evidence to support the claims that are being made today. It is important the committee is aware of that and that we are all playing an oversight role in that regard. For that, we need a national independent Traveller accommodation authority.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: Having represented Travellers under the equal status claims, several of which they have been denied participation in, I can attest that there is no question that there is widespread discrimination. There is no doubting that.

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I thank the witnesses for their statements and wisdom today. I share their concerns. I would like to raise some issues for the record. At a time when more families are falling into severe deprivation and many sites lack basic infrastructure, such as functioning wastewater systems, it is incredibly disappointing to read from the recent Office of the Planning Regulator, OPR, report that only four development plans make a genuine effort to include accommodation needs for Travellers by including maps to identify Traveller-specific accommodation, and that of the four, only one development plan includes potential sites. The funding is there for new builds and refurbishment, both of which are critically needed. However, political will has not been there in recent times.

We need proper, long-term, sustainable planning and a uniform approach to deliver Traveller-specific accommodation, led by local authority executive planners in our development plans. From what I am hearing, today they typically come to councillors with a plan and develop it. I do not recall that happening in my days as councillor. That is an important space, that councillors can be educated where these sites can go. If the report says what it says, it is disap-

pointing. Maintenance should be carried out on existing sites and basic infrastructure provided in the short term, as we talked about. That should be prioritised to ensure that no child or family is living in deprivation. In my experience, there is a disconnect in how we are supporting and protecting Travelling communities. The Housing First system provides a wraparound system of services. Is something akin to that required to address this issue, apart from delivering the facilities and services?

Based on the figures provided, an overwhelming majority of Travellers live in accommodation provided by the State and-or the private market, approximately 78%, and only 22% in Traveller-specific accommodation. My first question, then, probably answers itself. Is a lack of Traveller-specific accommodation forcing families to look for alternative accommodation in the social or private housing sector? I would also like to hear the witnesses' views on the lack of basic water infrastructure. It is simply incomprehensible that 5% of Travellers are living without piped water or sewerage services. It is the responsibility of the national government and local government to ensure that these issues are addressed as soon as they are identified. At the very least, local authorities should be directed by the Department, as a matter of urgency, to use the funding they have been allocated to ensure basic infrastructure is provided.

There is an example of a serious drainage issue in my constituency. It has been ongoing for more than a decade and involves raw effluent backing up into a dweller's properly. The issue has been identified, but it still has been not been remedied. It is an ongoing issue that involves a lady, with children, who frequently has to move out of her house.

I am also interested in the pilot caravan loans scheme, which is due to be rolled out nationally in 2022. Will the witnesses elaborate on the detail of this scheme and how it has been received by the Travelling community? How many applicants have applied for the scheme so far and been approved?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I can elaborate on that point in conjunction with Ms Murtagh, our national policy officer. I will pass over to Ms Murtagh on the pilot caravan loan question as she is dealing directly with it.

On the question about water services, many of the families living in poor accommodation that we spoke about probably share basic facilities, such as water. In some cases, it might not even be hot water they are sharing, but the basic water supply. The report from the Ombudsman for Children's Office commented on that point. It is also an issue in other parts of the country, and we are highlighting that. While there have been reports on this issue, we know from direct contact with our members that many families are living without these basic facilities and many are also sharing facilities.

The Deputy asked what steps are being taken to remedy this problem. During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was talk of mitigating its spread. We described it as a humanitarian crisis because nobody knew what was in store for us at the time or what the fallout or implications would be. Looking at other European countries and other countries abroad, it became evident that we were dealing with a crisis. We then had a race against time to show that many Traveller families did not have a water supply, did not have water at home and were unable to comply with the guidelines issued by the Department of Health. That resulted in a push by the Department and the Minister at the time and a circular was issued to all local authorities directing them to address and mitigate the Covid-19 crisis. It had a positive impact because those steps led to an improvement in some of the conditions. The steps taken, however, were basic. The community was left vulnerable to catching Covid-19 and also serious illness and death. We were

disproportionately impacted by the virus, and the report stated this, in respect of the number of people infected by Covid-19-----

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I am slow to cut Mr. Joyce off, but I am conscious of other members. I ask Ms Murtagh to hold her answer on the pilot caravan loan scheme until the next round of questions. I call Deputy Gould.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I thank the witnesses for being with us today and for giving us their thoughts. My first question is for Mr. Cummins. He made a point earlier about Traveller accommodation being a complex issue. It is a complex issue and I would not deny that for one minute. The local authorities are ultimately responsible. I was a member of Cork City Council for 12 years. We had a number of issues with halting sites and the provision of Traveller accommodation. If the city managers or chief executives of local authorities are not being supported by the Government in addressing these issues, they must call that out or accept responsibility. I do not accept chief executives or local authorities saying they cannot sort out this issue. It is their job to sort it out. These problems have been experienced in my constituency for more than 30 years. If the local authorities are not being supported by whatever Government is in office, and I am not taking a shot at any political parties in saying this, and if this is a complicated issue, then the local authorities must either accept responsibility or call out the lack of support where it exists. I will come back in again with more questions, if I have time remaining.

Mr. Eugene Cummins: What I meant was that we rely on the Part 8 planning process to deliver Traveller-specific accommodation and units and that relies on the political will, political wishes and bureaucratic process as determined by the elected members. It is not within the gift of the chief executives to grant permission for Part 8 developments. It is down to the elected members to do so.

Returning to this matter being a complex issue, it is also a complex issue sometimes for local communities. They are asked to take on trust a new Part 8 development into their community and that everything will work out. In many instances, it does, but in others it does not. Again, the chief executives of local authorities only have certain powers. The political process and the Part 8 process are for the elected members.

On the issue of our responsibilities, we are very much aware of them and we take them seriously. I am saying it is a complex issue because other people must get involved, including social workers, care workers and the HSE. They must get involved, talk to the communities and determine how we can work together. In my case, we have a good relationship with the Travelling community. We are mindful of that and we work on it. I also went down to the-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: I will cut Mr. Cummins short because I have another question. I worked in Cork City Council with some brilliant officials, to be fair. The point being made by Mr. Cummins may tie in with a point made earlier by my colleague, Deputy Ó Broin. He referred to having a dedicated full-time senior official in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to deal with this issue. Should there be a senior official in local authorities to tie in the point? That is the issue if we are going to work with the Traveller community. It is so segmented and broken up that we are not delivering. The point Mr Cummins made about getting everyone involved in one room was very similar to a group in which I was involved in Cork years ago. We had local authority officials, councillors, the Traveller community, the settled community, community gardaí and the HSE. That is the kind of thing we should be looking for.

Ms Murtagh touched on the caravan loan scheme earlier. I was contacted by a lady this morning whose caravan has no bathroom and no shower. It is freezing cold. She is now facing another winter. She has been in this accommodation for six years and cannot get a replacement. What are we hoping will come out of this for people like Margaret? What should come out of this?

Ms Emily Murtagh: I will take those two questions together. The first was asking for an update around the caravan loan scheme and the second was the hopes for it. The caravan loan scheme is something that is provided for under the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998. A scheme that was running in some of the local authorities previously was found to be not fit for purpose for several reasons, one of them being the small amount that was offered. It was approximately €5,000, which obviously does not lead to the kind of high-quality accommodation that is necessary for residential year-round living. Over the last few years, there has been work to deliver a new preferential caravan loan scheme. There are some positive aspects to it and some aspects to it that we would still have reservations about. Serious concerns have been raised around the country, both in some of the pilot areas and in other areas. Some of the positives are that it is a higher loan amount than the previous scheme, so it is up to €30,000 and it is also at a preferential rate. The full amount will not be paid back over the period and it is based on the differential rates in that area in which the repayments are made. Some of the reservations we have are that due to increased pricing around mobile accommodation, increased staycationing and increased access due to Brexit and other issues, €30,000 is no longer sufficient to provide that high-standard residential quality mobile home. National Traveller MABS has done really good research on what that might look like. The pilot scheme is running in four local authority areas, namely, Dublin City Council, Cork city and Limerick city and county. Dublin city and south Dublin are the two Dublin schemes. The pilot is very much oversubscribed. The Deputy asked about the numbers that maybe have applied to it. The Minister of State, Deputy Burke, referenced earlier that in one local authority, 47 people have applied for it. The budget for the pilot at the moment is €1.5 million, meaning approximately 50 mobiles will be provided across the four local authority areas. It is oversubscription within just the pilot areas and we should consider that is four local authorities out of 31.

As well as that, the loan scheme is not going to be the option for everyone who is in need of a new mobile home. A loan of €30,000 is a big undertaking. Mobile homes still need to be consistently provided through other funding streams, including the emergency caravans provision. That might be something similar to what Deputy Gould referenced. There need to be other mechanisms by which Travellers who wish to live in Traveller-specific accommodation are being given mobile homes. The other reservation is the quality of the mobile homes being delivered and that is not covered under the housing standards for rental housing reservations. There are not, therefore, those kinds of safeguards for Travellers. For some people it will definitely be a great option but the overall thing is that it should not be the only option for Travellers who wish to live in mobile accommodation. I do not know if Mr. Joyce wants to add anything to that.

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): We are out of time on that slot. We may have additional time once Deputy Flaherty has had the opportunity to ask his question.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: My apologies Chairmen; I was trying to multi-task and that is dangerous for a politician. I thank Mr. Joyce and Mr. Cummins for coming in. I appreciate Mr. Joyce's passion, in particular. I feel embarrassed as an elected representative that many of these issues are continuing. My earnest hope is that over the coming 12 months, we will see some

progress, particularly with regard to transient accommodation and halting sites. It is an indictment on us as we head into the second centenary of this nation. We pride ourselves on being a proud nation and also as being a nation of empathy. It is an indictment of us that those standards of conditions are allowed to prevail.

I come from County Longford, which has the highest population *per capita* of Travellers in the country. We have also the fastest growing *per capita* Traveller population aged under 15. A huge part of my constituency is the Traveller community. They enhance my day in many respects and I have a great engagement with them. The biggest single issue they have is housing. While transient accommodation and halting sites and so forth are hugely important and must be addressed as a matter of urgency, 45% of the Traveller community are still currently in local authority or in approved tenancies, and a further 20% or thereabouts are in private rental. That is a challenge that is not being addressed in anything I have heard today. The Minister of State said that money is being allocated to capital but I still see many Traveller families, and particularly younger Traveller families, who feel marginalised in some of the best local authority estates that we are building. In their wisdom, local authorities will still say that they will put one or two Traveller families into an estate and keep them separated. That is not the way Traveller culture works. The young people, in the main, do not want to be in halting sites or do not want transient accommodation. They want to get into a home and they value a home. They invest heavily and put any spare money they get into their home. We heard some people talk about a wrap-around service and I would agree with Mr. Cummins. It is not entirely the role of the local authorities to address the Traveller issue. Other agencies have to come on board as well. As much as capital investment is important, and it is the first thing that is needed, there is also a significant resourcing issue. People have talked about putting somebody in charge of this in the Custom House. We really need boots on the ground in local communities. We need resource workers. We need people in with the Traveller community but also with other members and other families on the estate to create greater integration. We have an awful lot to learn from the Traveller community. They have a wonderful tradition and culture. I have said many times that I believe Longford is greatly enhanced as a result of that. It is a shared experience from which we can learn. My concern is that we need to get the capital issue sorted but we also need to put the resources in on the ground. We need more resource workers and more investment in our Traveller accommodation committees. We need to do everything else that we can do to help those people. At the end of the day, the bulk of our Traveller community are in existing accommodation. As I said, however, many of them feel isolated. I am sorry; I was rambling.

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): The Deputy is perfectly fine. Would anybody like to address any of the points raised by Deputy Flaherty?

Mr. Eugene Cummins: I thank the Chairman for the opportunity to respond. Can I say to our friends in the Traveller community and, indeed, everyone else, that the County and City Management Association is absolutely committed to providing the best accommodation for everyone on our housing list, especially children who are living in deplorable conditions? I have seen them and it is terrible. We are very committed but we really need a buy in and an acceptance that there are broad issues that have to be addressed. We need to sit around the table to get them addressed and dealt with and get buy in from everyone. It is necessary to acknowledge that there are problems that need to be addressed and, in some instances, to stop the situations that exist. Let no one think for a second that we are not committed. We are very much aware of our obligations. I assure the committee that sending money back is not an option we ever like to take. We only consider doing so if we have to. I will not get into that issue today. I assure members of our full commitment to the expert review report. We have reservations which I

have highlighted, but that does not take away from our commitment to comply with our obligations. I thank members for the opportunity to come back before the committee to say that. I hope to meet members in other forums, where I will say the same thing to them.

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I am not sure whether Deputy Duffy wishes to come back in for the Green Party slot as he has already contributed. If he does not, there are a couple of members in the room who would like to come back in. I call Deputy Ó Broin.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I wish to make clear to Mr. Cummins that it is not and never has been my position that local authorities or local authority management are solely to blame for the scandal of Traveller accommodation. In fact, political parties, particularly the larger ones, my own included, have contributed to this problem, as have wider society and central government. We all have to accept a share of the responsibility. My frustration arises in the context of the really good roadmap we have. I know the CCMA will implement the law and always does so, but it is a very important and influential organisation and plays a role in the shaping of the law. I could be wrong, but my view is that there is less willingness to implement the elements of the recommendations of the expert group on Traveller accommodation that require legislative change in sections of the Department and in the local government sector. The only way we will cease having the same conversation over and over again is if we implement all 23 recommendations as a matter of urgency. We are two and a half years into it but most of the recommendations have not been implemented. I am urging Mr. Cummins to do what many members of this committee have done, which is to become convinced that the 32 recommendations are the best possible route and need to be implemented as soon as possible.

I suspect that if there was the same rigorous assessment of the Traveller accommodation programmes for 2020, 2019 and 2018 as there was under Michelle Norris for 2017 and before that, we would see an even higher level of non-compliance. For example, in my general election constituency, which makes up half of the local county council area, almost none of our Traveller accommodation plan has been progressed in the past two years. That is not because of a lack of good officials, councillors or people in Traveller advocacy groups, but we are two years into the plan and I cannot think of a single new Traveller-specific accommodation unit that has been provided in an area in which there is really high demand. That tells me that the old system is broken and that until we fully implement those recommendations, we will get no further. If Mr. Cummins has any information to suggest that my contention in respect of the non-implementation of the plans is wrong, I ask him to please share that with the committee, either today or at a later stage. I appreciate that he does not collate all of that information. For me, the takeaway concern today is that Mr. Joyce has told us he is not convinced that the 18 recommendations of the report of the committee that the Minister has indicated are on track to be implemented will be implemented, and they do not contain some of the most important recommendations, which are those listed.

This is not a party political issue; it is an issue on which we have to work together. Unless we start seeing significant changes, legislatively and locally, things will not improve in spite of the fact that everyone who has spoken here today has said they genuinely want them to improve. That is a parting comment rather than a question. If Mr. Cummins has further information, I ask him to please share it.

Mr. Eugene Cummins: It is complicated. It relies on political will and legislation. If it was not broken, we would not be here. We look forward to the final recommendations and how we will advance all of this. It is an important issue, especially for younger Travellers. It has to be done. It is broken in certain areas and needs to be fixed. Conversations such as this will help

to move things along.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: My apologies for missing the earlier part of the meeting. I refer to the CCMA. Some of my questions may have been addressed already but I will take that risk. The written submission provided by the CCMA states: "It should be noted that increasingly, greater expenditure from the maintenance budgets is being used to clean up increased levels of dumping on all sites." On the various sites, are there residents' associations with which local authorities liaise and work and which have a big input into what is decided for their site? Many ordinary halting sites have very small residential accommodation units and some of them have serviced units. After that, there is very little personal space for storing things and so on or for any small business the residents may have. Have residents' associations been set up on the various sites?

On the issue of the design of Traveller-specific accommodation, the submission states: "The CCMA has already engaged with DHLGH around the design of Traveller specific accommodation and looks forward to updated guidance for both Local authorities and AHBs in the design of Traveller Specific Accommodation." I have a straight question on that. I am stunned that the most important people, that is, those who will live in this accommodation, are not central to that process and that the submission does not state that the CCMA has discussed this with the Travellers who will live in this specific accommodation.

The submission refers to transient sites but seems to include a get-out-of-jail clause in that regard. It states:

> The CCMA wishes to highlight that the legislation is there to protect the rights of all and repealing it is an imposition on the rights of the entire community. It should be noted that our priority is to provide suitable permanent accommodation in the first instance.

That seems to me to indicate that the CCMA is not going to provide a national network of transient sites. However, we know some Travellers will travel in summer. They have been doing so forever. Just as many people go to matches and some people are involved with horses and horse racing and all sorts of things, there are Travellers who travel to certain areas. It has been agreed for many years that they should be accommodated in doing so. That is from where the idea of transient halting sites came. Until we face up to that reality, we will not make any progress. Is the reference in the submission a get-out-of-jail clause? Is it a simple statement that this transient halting site thing is a nice thing to put on paper but will not be implemented in practice?

There are 1 million issues I would like to raise, but there is one final issue I will address. The submission state: "The CCMA notes with concern that the report fails to acknowledge that the demand for Traveller specific accommodation is diminishing, especially among the younger generations, whose preference is not to live in halting site accommodation and who are increasingly seeking standard housing and group schemes." Is that a reference to Traveller-specific group schemes? Is the CCMA saying that, given the choice of a caravan halting site or Traveller-specific accommodation where people live with their relatives, neighbours and communities with whom they have always lived, many Travellers would, obviously, take the better class of accommodation, as would most people? Alternatively, is it saying these group schemes are something else, which does not relate to Traveller-specific group housing? The one type of housing the vast majority of Travellers do not want is HAP or RAS housing. The figures before us show there are a significant number of Travellers in such housing. The other option they definitely do not want is homeless housing. Unfortunately, many Travellers are forced into it.

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I invite Mr. Cummins to respond. He should feel free to delegate any of the questions to his officials.

Mr. Eugene Cummins: The accumulation of scrap or rubbish on any individual's property is an unauthorised activity and should not be done. We have caretakers on the site who keep an eye on that.

On Part 8, the design of any scheme involves full consultation with the residents and there would be a lot of toing and froing with them. I again repeat that the recommendations of the report are being progressed through the programme board with the Department, the CCMA and Traveller groups.

On the preferences of the younger generation, it appears it is not that interested in transient sites. That is based on analysis of data we collected in local authorities during the Traveller accommodation programme when we looked for information on it. To be quite clear, our priority is housing. It is the same as what we do for homelessness, which is housing first. That is our priority. I stated early in the document that we are looking forward to an all-Ireland approach to transient sites, if they are needed. Certainly, we know in County Cork, for instance, there is no interest among the Traveller community in a site. That does not mean, if this is something that analysis will show is required in a particular county, it will not be progressed. To be very clear, for everyone on our housing list, permanent housing is the preferred option. It is housing first, without question. There is no hidden agenda or secret there. That is what we want to do and that is what we are working towards. Do Mr. Manning or Ms Keenan want to add to that?

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I ask Deputy Ó Cuív to be very brief as our time is up.

Mr. Eugene Cummins: I think that covers it.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: My understanding is the Department will give money to implement the report, which includes transient halting sites. It is not, therefore, coming out of the pot that will go into permanent housing. I will put it this way. If you are building an ordinary housing estate, you will put recreational facilities and public parks or whatever in. You will not say it is houses or public parks. You will say that life's experience is a totality and, for some Travellers at least, part of present life is transient sites. It would not come out of the council's money and, therefore, I am a little surprised and taken aback by what Mr. Cummins said.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I will come in for a second because I know time is running out. I apologise, but I lost the connection. By 2017, we had campaigned for 30 years for recognition and what I am hearing is concerning. I am hearing that city and county managers are implying that Travellers want to be housed. We are not looking to be assimilated into housing. We are looking for supports around culturally appropriate provision of accommodation. The expert report, which has 32 recommendations, indicates in full, through a thorough process of consultation and dialogue, how those recommendations should be implemented. It is a roadmap for delivering on needs and how those needs can be met. We are working in collaboration with the CCMA, the Department and others on those recommendations. We are asking for timelines for delivery, provision of accommodation and for people to be taken out of some of the worst conditions in the world, including homelessness, which should be addressed with immediate effect. Some 50% of Travellers in Galway, for example, who are less than 1% of the population, are homeless, so they are over-represented. That is not by chance.

There is an idea that people can somehow gloss over this in some way with Housing for All, which is not for everybody. Why are there no specific timelines for the recommendations of the expert report? They should have been very clearly outlined because we can then work towards removing those families who are in the worst conditions and improving their situation. There is a lot to be said about what has been stated here about Travellers somehow moving towards housing. We do not know that. It has been stated in previous Oireachtas committees, and the Minister said this earlier, that the Department will determine full needs on the basis of the data coming in. There is no ethnic identifier, however, so how can city and county managers say that the community is moving towards housing? At the same time, Traveller families are more than 22 times more likely to be discriminated against in the private rental sector and housing assistance payment, HAP, is not an option. I do not see the private sector as the solution to Traveller accommodation. I see the real solution as real engagement, consultation and dialogue. As I said-----

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): Mr. Joyce, our time is up.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: -----institutionalised racism is implicit in the lack of delivery of culturally appropriate accommodation throughout this island. We need to accept that and the city and county managers need to come out - I not saying they are responsible but surely they must take some level of responsibility - with their members to highlight that. The last thing I will highlight-----

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): Mr. Joyce-----

Mr. Bernard Joyce: -----is when is the last time they did any training around anti-racism?

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I have to bring the committee to a close. Does Mr. Cummins want to respond briefly to Deputy Ó Cuív's point? I believe Mr. Joyce's point about the identifier, which was discussed in the earlier session, is an exceptionally important one and will guide the data on this issue. It needs to be expedited. Mr. Cummins has 30 seconds and then I have to bring matters to a conclusion.

Mr. Eugene Cummins: Any scheme that is provided will provide for the well-being of the residents, whether it is group housing or a halting site, if that is deemed to be necessary. My report and the recommendations of the review group are compatible in the broad sense and we are working on the design guidelines. We are working with Traveller groups and the Department in terms of the programme board and the implementation of this. This is a serious matter and it will require and get our absolute attention. It is not an easy topic and it is a complex situation. We have a huge housing list, we have refugees and asylum seekers and we have the needs of the entire community, which must be dealt with fairly and equitably with the resources that have been provided by the State.

Acting Chairman (Senator John Cummins): I thank the Department officials and the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, for their attendance at the earlier session, the Irish Traveller Movement, the County and City Management Association and members for their thorough questioning. I assure everyone the contributions made at this committee will be fully taken on board by us, as members and legislators, to ensure the best outcomes for all members of our communities.

The joint committee adjourned at 6.18 p.m. *sine die*.