DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

Déardaoin, 18 Samhain 2021

Thursday, 18 November 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 1.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Joan Collins,	Gerry Horkan.*
Dessie Ellis,	
Denise Mitchell,	
David Stanton.	

* In éagmais / In the absence of Senator Ned O'Sullivan.

Teachta / Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Vice Chairman: We have a quorum. I welcome all members to our public session. I have apologies from Senators Eileen Flynn and Ned O'Sullivan. The Ceann Comhairle of the Dáil and Cathaoirleach of the Seanad have appealed to everybody in the parliamentary community to continue to follow public health advice, wear a mask and maintain social distancing. I request that members, witnesses and staff use the wipes and so on. Since I am the only member here in person, along with Senator Horkan, we will abide by the rules.

Before we hear from our witnesses, we have some committee business to attend to. I remind members that they must be in the Leinster House complex in order to attend this meeting. If any member attempts to participate from outside Leinster House, I will have to ask them to leave the meeting. I would like to remind witnesses that as they are giving their evidence from outside Leinster House, they may not have the same privilege as if they were in Leinster House. They may think it appropriate to take legal advice on this matter. They are again reminded that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or damage the good name of any person. They must stop if I say they are breaking that rule.

The first bit of business is approval of the minutes, which has been discussed already in a virtual private session of the committee. The question is that we approve the minutes of the committee meeting held on 4 November 2021. Can I take it that these minutes are approved? Agreed.

Review of Traveller Inclusion Policy, Education and Health: Discussion

Vice Chairman: I apologise to the Minister for our delayed start. Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is quite a mouthful. I thank the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, and welcome him to the meeting. Before we hear from him, I suggest that we publish his opening statement on the web. Is that agreed? Agreed. Based on the evidence given by witnesses appearing before this committee since our first meeting over two years ago, including Traveller representatives, and visits by this committee to a number of Traveller accommodation and halting sites where we met many Travellers at their homes, it seems that the conditions that Travellers have to endure are far from ideal. The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021, NTRIS, was launched in June 2017 to address some of the issues faced by Travellers. It represents a whole-of-government approach and encompasses themes such as cultural identity, education, employment, health and accommodation, all of which are relevant to this committee. We will be very interested to hear what happens next.

I invite the Minister to make his opening statement after which we will have a question and answer session. We will try to keep everybody to five minutes as we go along to get in as many questions as possible and finish within the suggested time of one hour.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Good afternoon, Vice Chairman. I really appreciate the invitation from the committee to attend and discuss this really important matter. I am joined by my colleagues in the Department, Ms Carol Baxter and Ms Janet Lacey. I know many people on this committee have been engaging in working to support the Traveller and Roma communities over many years. We can all agree that the Traveller and Roma communities have long suffered from negative

stereotyping but also severe and systemic discrimination. The Government is committed to ensuring full equality of opportunity for Travellers and Roma and to removing barriers to their full and equal participation in Irish life. There has been progress on some of these issues and I will reference this in my speech today. However, we are all very conscious of a great amount more to do.

As members will be aware, the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 provides a framework for action on Traveller and Roma issues. It represents a whole-of-government approach, as the Vice Chairman said. It brings Government Departments and agencies together with representatives of the Traveller and Roma communities and their representative groups in a focused and structured way on key issues. The national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy, NTRIS, encompasses action on themes such as cultural identity, education, employment, health and accommodation. I chair the NTRIS steering committee, which includes Traveller and Roma representatives. Our most recent meeting was on 2 November. The Government Departments' report to the committee on implementing actions uses a traffic light system that helps to identify delays in the implementation of actions.

A number of subgroups are in place, such as in relation to education, with the aim of ensuring that key actions get the attention they need. Departments have responsibility for delivering actions under their areas of responsibility and for ensuring that sufficient resources are secured through the annual Estimates processes to facilitate those actions.

The programme for Government committed to a review of the strategy and I am committed to working with stakeholders to reviewing what has been achieved and to developing new approaches, as necessary, with a particular focus on implementation and measurement. One of the key points to come out of my chairing of this committee is the need for a greater outcomes focus on the NTRIS successor strategy. My Department is seeking proposals for an evaluation of the processes for implementation of three equality strategies, NTRIS, the migrant integration strategy and the national strategy for women and girls, all of which are concluding at the end of this year. The timeline for receipt of proposals for that evaluation is early December and the review will be completed by mid-2022. I have proceeded with an evaluation process that spans a number of equality strategies because I want to put the focus on implementation and on good practice. The objectives of our equality strategies remain largely relevant. The key challenge is to ensure better delivery. That is a challenge that goes beyond NTRIS. I want to identify potential good practice in some areas that can be transferred to others. I also want to see how intersectionality can be addressed more coherently. This issue in particular has been raised regularly at our NTRIS meetings. We know, for example, that the issues facing Traveller women and girls are different from those facing Traveller men and boys. We need to see in this context how the successor strategy to the national strategy for women and girls can work in tandem with NTRIS's successor strategy to deliver particular outcomes for Traveller women and girls, and similarly, for LGBTI+ members of the Traveller community with the LGBTI+ strategy. Intersectionality must be a real focus in the new NTRIS.

I have decided that the current NTRIS steering committee will remain in operation during the review process and that my Department will continue to convene meetings of the committee. Work will continue on implementing NTRIS actions, many of which remain very relevant. We will continue to engage with the Departments and representative organisations to ensure that actions are progressed. The strategy committee's role will also be pivotal in developing the consultation process and the content for the successor strategy. NTRIS continues to be regarded as a blueprint for action to address the needs of Traveller and Roma communities. In

this regard, the successor strategy will not represent change for the sake of change. I will listen very carefully to stakeholders to see what they advise on the changes needed. If they favour updating NTRIS rather than launching into a wholesale change of it, I will very much take those views on board. In that instance, the successor strategy would align closely to NTRIS. The advice provided by Traveller and Roma organisations will directly shape the scope and focus of the next strategy.

My Department has an important funding role to support activities linked to NTRIS. This year, my Department has provided €4.9 million of Exchequer funding and a further €700,000 from the Dormant Accounts Fund to support Traveller and Roma initiatives. Up to €3 million is provided as core funding to specific NGOs. This year, for budget 2022 I secured a 15% increase in funding for this area and the budget is now €5.659 million. We have also had a significant uplift in Dormant Accounts Funding, on which the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, worked very hard and particularly to direct additional Dormant Accounts Fund funding towards Traveller and Roma initiatives. This year, my Department will receive €940,000 in such funding, specifically for Traveller and Roma initiatives. I am aware that other Departments will see a similar uplift.

As the committee will be aware, funding is provided across a range of Government Departments to support and address the specific needs of the Traveller and Roma communities. In the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, for example, the Traveller-specific accommodation budget for 2020 was €14.5 million. I am aware that the committee has dedicated several meetings to the issue of Traveller accommodation and has heard from the Ombudsman for Children in relation to the No End in Site report. We can all agree that the report made for incredibly difficult reading about the conditions on the site in question.

The annual HSE expenditure on Traveller and Roma-specific health initiatives is in the region of €10 million, including €350,000 on Traveller mental health. The HSE has recruited two dedicated Traveller health posts to develop a Traveller health policy and to co-ordinate implementation of the Traveller health action plan. My Department has provided additional funding and other supports to our partner Traveller organisations for the continued provision of necessary services during Covid-19 to the Traveller and Roma population, including in appropriate languages.

School attendance is a specific challenge for some members of the Traveller and Roma communities and I am aware that the Department of Education will be meeting with the committee later today. My Department provides funding for a pilot programme to target attendance, participation, retention and school completion in specific Traveller and Roma communities. Deputy David Stanton initiated this programme when he was the Minister of State with responsibility for this area. The pilot team works together with parents, children and young people, schools, Traveller and Roma communities and service providers to remove the barriers impacting on Traveller and Roma children's attendance, participation and retention in schools. The pilots are taking place in Galway, Wexford, Dublin and Cork. The Out of the Shadows report, which was the baseline study on this pilot has just been published in the last few days. I have not had a chance to read through the entire report but I have seen the summary. Two aspects stick out for me, namely, the majority of Travellers felt unwanted in schools and their overall experience of the education system was "bleak". That was the word used. This is a real flag to us all about the importance of acting in this area, given that this is their view and their experience. Members will be aware there is a commitment in the programme for Government to a Traveller education strategy that will look at early years, which falls under my Department; primary and secondary,

which falls under the Department of Education; and third level education and further education, which falls under the Department of the Minister, Deputy Harris. Work on this Traveller education strategy will be progressed by the education subgroup of NTRIS.

Employment is also an ongoing challenge in the communities. My Department funds the special initiative for Travellers, SIT, to provide support for practical approaches to redressing the imbalance in Traveller under-employment, to support Travellers already engaged in the Traveller economy and to provide other supports, including training, to address the needs of Travellers. The SIT funding includes support workers and assistance for employment and enterprise development. There are currently SITs in seven locations around Ireland. Additional funding has also been provided to Involve, a community organisation, to assist this. The Pathways to Work Strategy 2021 – 2025 has a focus on the additional barriers to entering work faced by those in the Traveller and Roma communities. The strategy will, for the first time, set out specific commitments relating to the Traveller and Roma communities and will examine how to capture data on ethnicity.

The impact of the pandemic has led to increased stress and anxiety in the Traveller and Roma communities. My Department funds both the Traveller Mediation Service and the Traveller Counselling Service. This year, €330,000 has been made available to the Traveller Counselling Service and €240,000 to the Traveller Mediation Service. One of mediation service's unique attributes is that it employs Travellers as mediators who have the necessary understanding of Traveller culture and who inspire confidence in Travellers to avail of the service. There has been an increase in demand for the services and especially self-referrals from Traveller women.

My Department also funds the National Traveller Women's Forum, which is working to empower Traveller women. Additional funding was provided for community projects that support and promote leadership roles for Traveller and Roma women. There is a need to enhance cultural awareness of Traveller identity and to create greater visibility of Traveller culture and heritage. My Department has worked to advance this and has provided funding of €100,000 for Traveller Pride Week to empower national, regional and local organisations to celebrate Traveller and Roma culture and diversity. We are also progressing a project with the National Museum of Ireland to develop an online portal to Traveller culture collections. This will see the creation of an online portal of objects, archives, photographs, recordings and other collections held in the national cultural institutions and a national folklore archive pertaining to Traveller culture or history.

The collection of data on Traveller and Roma participation in public service programmes and services is crucial to understanding the degree of access that Travellers and Roma have to various services and programmes. We need disaggregated data, which is crucial for determining outcomes for Travellers and Roma. Work has been undertaken within the NTRIS framework to develop an ethnic identifier, whereby Traveller and Roma participation in service programmes can be disaggregated and outcomes can be tracked. This work is now feeding into a broader process, led by my Department and the Central Statistics Office, CSO, to develop a new equality data strategy, which will have a major impact on issues of race and outcomes for different racial groups in our society. The equality data strategy's purpose will be to establish a cross-departmental framework for gathering data and standardising the classification of such data. The strategy is being advanced under the auspices of the equality budgeting working group, jointly chaired by my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, which is developing capacity within the public service to assess the equality aspects of budgetary expenditure.

I reiterate my commitment, and that of the Government, to supporting action to ensure that Travellers and members of the Roma community can participate fully and equally in Irish society. As I said at the start, I am conscious that a major amount of work remains to be done. I look forward to receiving the committee's report in due course, which I hope will also help to inform the successor strategy to NTRIS.

Vice Chairman: I thank the Minister for a comprehensive presentation.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank the Minister for a very comprehensive report on the workings of NTRIS to date. A question remains to be answered. Funding is going into this strategy and committees and equality groups have been set up, yet the situation has not changed on the coalface. That is the reality of it. It is a question of how we transpose all these reports and groups to the reality on the ground.

Members of the committee visited the Spring Lane halting site in Cork on the basis of the Ombudsman for Children's report. It would be an underestimate to say that it did not have a big impact on all of us. Travellers have been living in those conditions for nearly 30 years. Things are not changing quickly enough. It is a slow process, which causes a lot of distrust in the community of officials, councillors and the powers that be. Travellers are getting visits from people all the time, including Deputies, CEOs, officials and the ombudsman, and things still have not changed.

We visited Labre Park in Ballyfermot on Monday. Travellers there have worked with council officials for 21 years to put a plan in place to upgrade the site. It is not happening. We have to find ways to move these blocks that are there all the time. We also visited St. Margaret's halting site on Monday, which is a better site, but Travellers there got themselves organised and used the leverage of the super depot being built by the council right beside them. They said that if the council was going to put €100 million into that, they wanted a cut of it for a super site in the community estate that they live in. It is just an observation that many things seem to be set up, but their implementation is not happening. We have to get over that. One criticism of NTRIS is that it has a lot of information but the implementation of it is not quick enough.

Some €14.5 million was fully spent on Traveller-specific accommodation. Is there a breakdown of where that Traveller-specific accommodation was? Was it on a site in Galway or Mayo? I received a report about a site in Mayo that has not had proper water or sanitation for the past 21 years. It is a simple thing to get someone to go in to do the job that needs to be done in a way that is not piecemeal. One thing I noticed from the feedback we got from much of the Traveller community is that someone is coming in and fixing a pothole, or a problem with a water connection or something like that, but no one is going in and doing the fundamental groundwork that needs to be done to facilitate everybody receiving proper water, sanitation, etc. The Minister said that he expected the €15.5 million in 2021 to be fully spent. I ask for a breakdown of where that Traveller-specific accommodation funding has been spent.

I welcome the fact that the ethnic identifier system has been set up. That will make a difference.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I completely agree with the wider points the Deputy made on things not happening fast enough. We are seeing high-level changes in policy, such as recognition of Traveller ethnicity. We are seeing changes in that NTRIS is being introduced and adopted as an all-of-Government strategy, but we are not seeing enough substantive changes on sites and in people's lives throughout the country. One reason for this is that NTRIS was

designed in such a way that an outcome is achieved when a policy or law is changed. If a new policy is adopted on education, then there is a tick and we are seen to be in the green, rather than having 50% more Traveller children finish secondary education. It is key that we have measurable outcomes in the new NTRIS that we are able to start relating to.

That also ties in with the issue of data on equality, which the Deputy identified as key, and the fact that we are not measuring Traveller participation in, and use of, various public services alone. The equality data will include data on people with different ethnic backgrounds as we are a much more racially mixed country now. We need to bring in that data. My Department is leading on that and working with the CSO on it. I am always conscious that when I talk about something that is about to happen we are again pushing progress back further, but I think everybody agrees these abilities to measure are crucial.

We can ask for a breakdown of the €14.5 million on the Traveller-specific accommodation from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I do not have that specific breakdown; it comes under housing. I will touch on the Deputy's overall question about areas where we are not seeing progress. Housing is one area where there has not been progress over the past ten years. As she knows, a significant report was drafted by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. A programme board is now in place in that Department, which is looking at the report's 18 key recommendations and seeing how they will be delivered. My Department also set up a programme board to draft and implement the White Paper on direct provision. I see the use of a programme board that brings in people from outside the Department as a good technique to achieve significant change.

We all have to admit that Travellers have faced systemic racism in respect of the accommodation element. Those of us who have been on local authorities know that there was huge resistance when we tried to bring new sites into areas. It was not at council level but often from constituents. When we voted to allow for Traveller accommodation, we encountered a significant pushback. It is important that leadership be shown by politicians in the Dáil and Seanad, civil servants in Departments, and councillors in both county and city councils. We must make it clear that our Traveller community is part of our community. It is essential that we provide appropriate accommodation for Travellers within our communities. We will follow up on the question on expenditure in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Deputy Joan Collins: The Minister is right about pushback, but people are pushing back because of the state of the halting sites in which Travellers are living. We have to turn that around. If communities are to have the right services and accommodation, some serious work will have to be done.

Deputy David Stanton: I welcome the Minister and thank him for his kind words. I thank his officials, whom I know well from many years chairing the NTRIS group. I can empathise regarding many of the issues raised because I have been through this quite a bit. I agree fully with the Minister with respect to the outcomes and the need to have a measurement in this regard. The pilot project on education that was referred to is a way of achieving this because we know how many children are impacted. It is relatively easy to see how that will develop. I am interested in knowing when the pilot project will finish up. I realise we are to have an official from the Department of Education in next. What will the outcomes be?

The ethnic identifier has been kicking around for a long time. It will be interesting to see where it is going and when it will be finalised. I remember dealing with it for a couple of years, and it was always put off. It is quite challenging.

There are 149 actions in the NTRIS. How many have been completed? I get what the Minister said about ticking the box. That is a problem. The steering committee has over 30 people around the table representing Departments, agencies, local authorities and so on. Therefore, there are many people responsible, but ultimately accountability and reporting back in detail have been a challenge all the time. That will need to be addressed.

The mediation service has been a huge success. In the past, I had occasion to engage with the people involved. The Travellers in prison initiative has also been a great success. I was glad to see the horse project happening. Maybe it should happen elsewhere. How many of the actions have not been started yet? How many are facing a substantial delay? How many of the 149 have been completed?

What the Minister referred to earlier is typical of the NTRIS and perhaps some of the other strategies. The Minister said he does not have the facts and figures regarding housing and must go to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage for them. He will find himself trotting off to that Department. I am aware that the officials in the Minister's Department, and previously those in the Department of Justice, have worked very hard behind the scenes engaging with officials in other Departments to try to get information and updates and to ensure something substantial will happen, not just a box-ticking exercise. There is an opportunity to proceed but I agree that there needs to be tightening up with respect to the outcomes and to making them truly measurable rather than box-ticking exercises somewhere along the way.

We are concerned about what is going on in the various accommodation centres. I visited many of them when I was Minister of State. They have not changed. There is pushback in the community, from citizens and others, when there is talk of Traveller accommodation being established anywhere. Councillors are very often blamed, but quite often they are just repeating what their constituents say to them. There is a volume of work to be done in society with regard to the prejudice the Minister referred to.

I wish the Minister well with this. It is extremely challenging. We really need to sit on it with respect to all Departments, State agencies and local authorities regarding their responsibilities. The NTRIS oversight committee can do a certain amount, but ultimately, because it has tentacles extending all over the place, it is very hard to follow every one of them and to ensure things happen.

That is my contribution. I wish the Minister and his officials well in their work.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank the Deputy. I recognise the significant work he did in this area during his term of office.

On the 149 actions under the NTRIS, only two have not been started. Therefore, there have been significant advances. All the others have been commenced. I just do not have the figure for how many are fully concluded but I will write to the committee after this meeting to give a breakdown, indicating the two actions that have not been started yet.

On the specific point on the education pilot programme, we have decided to extend the programme into a third year because Covid had a very significant impact on its operation. I am aware from my engagement on the NTRIS and with a range of Traveller NGOs, with whose representatives I have regular one-on-one meetings and whom I meet at Traveller events, that there is genuine concern across the community about the impact of Covid and the attendance of Traveller children in schools. Particularly when schools reopened in September 2020, there

was a very significant drop-off in school attendance. The remote schooling that worked so well for most families across the country probably did not work for the vast majority of Traveller families because they did not have laptops and unhindered access to Wi-Fi. That is a major issue, including in the community.

The Out of the Shadows report, which I spoke about, very much acts as a baseline study of the five areas in which the pilot has been commenced. It was published recently. I hope it will be the subject of analysis and debate. It will give us the baseline from which to measure the success of the pilot initiatives. There will be an evaluation but it will take place after three years because Covid affected the operations so much.

The Deputy is correct about data. This issue will be difficult. It has now been identified in so many other areas. For example, the national anti-racism committee, established at the end of the term of the last Government and which is bringing forward the national action plan against racism, identified in its interim report the lack of ethnicity data as a key facilitator of racism in the country, because we cannot measure the impact of policies or their absence. In a range of areas, the lack of information has been identified as a key problem. I hope, therefore, that we can have developments in this regard. Given my background, I am passionate about statistics and using data to drive good policy. That is why I believe it is important to have a policy on ethnicity data.

The mediation service is a brilliant resource. It and the Traveller Counselling Service are both, in their own ways, absolutely fabulous at helping to deal with conflict within communities. We will continue to support them. We were able to give them a little bit of extra support in the form of dormant accounts funding at the end of this year.

My officials have just texted me to say 16 of the NTRIS actions have been fully completed. We will write to the committee with a full breakdown of the figures following this meeting.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank the Minister for his attendance. We have all seen the different sites and we will see more. We have been around for many years dealing with Travellers' issues. However, not very much seems to have changed. The standard at sites depends on the different local authorities. The lack of spending by the local authorities has been well highlighted. What actions is the Minister taking against some of these local authorities? There is no doubt that, apart from the prejudice he mentioned in the ordinary community, there is an awful lot of prejudice in the local authorities. I found a very big resistance over the years in certain cases. Does the Minister have ideas or penalties to deal with this or do we have any actions that would put them on the spot?

The ombudsman's report was very damning in regards to Cork. That has obviously kicked them a bit. It is very strange that in the whole of Cork, whether it be Cork county or city, there is not one horse project. While I am not saying that is the be all and end all, many young Traveller kids are involved in horse projects. They are blaming each other as to why there is no horse project in that one blames the county while the other blames the city. This has to be dealt with and we cannot allow people to make excuses.

In many cases, we go to Part 8 provisions to look for things to be done. Are we pushing the managers to use the executive powers they have if things are not being dealt with? There seems to be and has been for a long time a reluctance to do that. What is the Minister's position on that?

My area has many schools in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, scheme. From what was said, there is more money coming into the DEIS schools, and that the scheme will be expanded a bit, which is very welcome. I would like to see what is intended in that regard. Special education and other supports are provided for people who attend DEIS schools. Breakfast clubs and homework clubs are very important in many cases and I would like to see a bit more put into them. I have seen many times young children coming to school without having eaten breakfast. They do not have anything but are going in and are expected to take part in school. I would like to make sure that does not happen; it should not happen.

The Minister mentioned the Dormant Accounts Fund, and I believe a figure of €500,000 was mentioned. I am not sure what that would do in practical terms. Perhaps we need to look at expanding this and the Minister mentioned that he might be thinking of doing so. What would that give us? From an educational point of view, we need to look at putting as much money as we possibly can into improving services. Whether children have to make their way to school or otherwise, we need to do that.

The accommodation, obviously, is a major factor. It varies so much. We saw really bad accommodation in Cork. We also saw it in Labre Park and in St. Margaret's as well. There are plans in place and I have been dealing with St. Margaret's for years, which is a lot better than the other sites. I have been going to meeting after meeting on accommodation, however, for more than ten years.

Turnover in the council, which is quite common, is another factor. New people are brought in and every couple of years there is a different person to deal with. It is very poor on the part of local authorities. This issue of accommodation has dragged on and it is very frustrating. To add to it, there is no penalty imposed as a result of it being dragged out. We have been promised three houses in Avila Park and the building of bungalows and a bay in St. Margaret's. We have had consultation after consultation, many meetings with the Travellers, with the local authority and in some cases with politicians. We need to put the pressure on and things need to be better because things have not changed that much. However, I am hopeful now, with the ombudsman's report, the Minister's interest, everyone pushing and this committee putting the pressure on. It will be very important.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Deputy has rightly highlighted that accommodation is central to resolving this issue and is one of the most pressing issues. Accommodation, health, particularly mental health, and education are the probably the issues that come up most regularly and most strongly within NTRIS, with NTRIS committee meetings and with my own engagement with individual groups as well.

Deputy Ellis spoke about actions having been taken against local authorities and how we press local authorities to do more. The work of the Ombudsman for Children in focusing on the Spring Lane site definitely has put a real focus on both the role of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and in particular on the role of the local authority in question. I know because the Ombudsman for Children has engaged with my Department and has been critical of elements of my own Department in terms of direct provision. However, we built a really strong relationship and it has a monitoring role but it is an ongoing engagement. I hope we will see that same sort of engagement with Cork City Council in terms of the Spring Lane site.

There are other ways in which pressure can be exerted on local authorities as well. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, was in with me a number of weeks ago and it has been conducting an engagement with each local authority across the country, asking

it what are its policies and practices in respect of Traveller accommodation. The commission has received replies from most of them and may be engaging in - I do not want to say a punitive process - a follow-up and monitoring process that can be escalated to a punitive process, if necessary. That is going on at the moment and it might be interesting for the committee to write to IHREC and seek an update on that process. I certainly found it interesting and they are following up at present. The commission found that the policies and practices are incredibly diverse and different across our local authorities. That is problematic itself because Travellers, obviously in terms of their nomadic lifestyle, can be engaging with a whole different set of policies, practices, and approaches in each of our local authorities.

I absolutely agree with the Deputy in terms of the importance of horse projects as a clear manifestation of Traveller culture and as a practical step to teaching young Travellers how to look after their horses and how to avoid any animal welfare issues that may have been encountered in the past. They are really worth supporting.

The Deputy mentioned the area of DEIS in the context of education and yes, we will see a very significant increase in spending on DEIS schools next year. The committee will have the Department of Education appear before it next and its representatives probably will be able to speak to that in more detail. I am delighted to see the overall increase in DEIS spending. The Deputy spoke about the importance of homework clubs for young Traveller children and that is definitely something I would recognise.

School-age childcare for Travellers is something that had been impacted by some of the measures around the national childcare scheme, NCS. I announced a removal of one such measure in the budget this year. I will not get into huge detail but it is this idea of wraparound hours, whereby hours spent in school were subtracted from the total number of hours that children could spend in after-school. It basically meant that during term time, children from disadvantaged areas would not be able access after-school provision. That will be changed from early next year because of the new funding measure that I introduced in this year's budget. I hope that will have a significant impact on after-school services in a range of disadvantaged communities and in particular in the Travelling community.

A key point is access to preschool for Travellers. As we all know, there is the early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme with two years of free preschool. I do not have the figure to hand right now but there is a difference of about 10% or 15% between participation of the settled community and participation by the Travelling community in ECCE. Immediately that gap in education is established before the first day of primary school, so part of the Traveller education strategy I spoke about earlier will be to ensure higher levels of participation by Traveller children in the two-year free preschool ECCE programme. That is a key priority for me which I can follow up in my Department.

On dormant accounts, it is what it is but it is a good additional stream of funding, particularly for more discrete projects. For example, next year there will be funding of just short of €1 million, at €940,000, to fund measures to address conflict and mental health issues in the Traveller community, a Roma adult education and training project, targeted resources to support young people from the Traveller community to join and be active members of their local Comhairle na nÓg and Traveller and Roma community education posts supports addressing the impact of Covid-19 on participation, retention and progression through the education system. Those are the four discrete projects my Department will be funding through the Dormant Accounts Fund. It is a useful way to guide money to a particular project for the short to medium term, rather than the long term, and perhaps use it and assess whether the project was successful

and whether it got the outcomes we spoke about earlier.

Vice Chairman: I understand the Minister can remain here until 2.45 p.m. so there are fewer than 15 minutes left. Deputy Mitchell is next and I am after her. If we keep it tight, there might be time left to go around very briefly for a one-minute round of questions.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I will ask the questions together so we can get through them more quickly. First, am I correct in reading from the Minister's opening statement that he hopes to have the review completed by June 2022? I wish to follow up on what Deputy Ellis was discussing. There are many figures and amounts in the opening statement. The Department has over €5.5 million and €3 million of that is going to NGOs. Can the Minister give us a breakdown of the €2.5 million? He probably will not have it to hand here, but perhaps he could forward the breakdown of that €2.5 million to the committee. To what types of projects is this money going?

The Minister spoke about the special initiative for Travellers, which is welcome. I am a little underwhelmed that it is only seven locations. Can the Minister tell the committee where the seven locations are and whether there are any plans for expanding the initiative?

I wish to echo what Deputies Joan Collins and Ellis said. We visited the Spring Lane site last week and it was very depressing to see it. As the Minister with responsibility for children and equality, what type of engagement is he having with the council regarding Spring Lane and monitoring the work that is going on there?

Vice Chairman: Those are specific questions for the Minister.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The review I spoke about that will be completed in June 2022 is a review of the effectiveness of three of our current equality strategies - NTRIS, the national strategy for women and girls and the migrant integration strategy. It is to look at where they have been successful, what parts of them have not succeeded and the issues of intersectionality and how the three equality strategies can better address those issues. That report will help to feed into the design of the NTRIS successor strategy. However, we will not be waiting until that report is done to do anything else.

As I said, the steering committee for the existing NTRIS will continue to meet. I agreed at our last meeting that we will spend the majority of the next meeting focused on hearing what the groups want to see in the next NTRIS. We have NTRIS and in the programme for Government there are commitments to a number of strategies in specific areas, such as an education strategy, an employment strategy and a health action plan. I want to get an understanding of how the overarching NTRIS will operate with these more sectional things as well. There is no point in us being laden with this strategy and that strategy. We cannot spend all our time writing strategies because what we need is implementation. That is the focus, so I want to hear from those groups about how they see those different elements operating. They wanted a Traveller and Roma education strategy in the programme for Government and we included that. They wanted an employment strategy and we put it in. However, I need to understand how they see that working with the overarching strategy. It may be that we have NTRIS as the overarching strategy and we have, perhaps, action plans in specific Departments that will set out, for example, how the seven objectives in NTRIS that are relevant to my Department will actually be delivered and what the measurements of that delivery will be. Again, I want to be guided very much by the Traveller groups in how all that happens.

Regarding the expenditure in the Department, we can send that to the committee. However, €2.2 million of that €5.5 million goes to core Traveller funding, that is, core funding for the major Traveller organisations. Some €480,000 goes to the education pilot programmes we spoke about earlier, which Deputy Stanton introduced. A total of €700,000 goes to other NGO core funding. Those are NGOs that are not solely Traveller NGOs but that work substantially in the Traveller field. The special incentive for Travellers accounts for €440,000. There is core Roma funding of €116,000, a Roma employment project for €400,000, a Roma inclusion project for €200,000 and then €125,000 for Traveller Pride and Roma Day. Then we had €200,000 for specific Covid-19 needs. We can send the information to the committee, but that is an update on the 2021 spending. Obviously, we have not assigned all the subheads yet for 2022, but it was €4.9 million for 2021. Next year we will have €5.5 million, and we can send those figures to the committee.

As regards the special incentives for Travellers, I might write separately to the committee on that. I do not have a huge overview of why there are only seven there. Again, initiatives like that have to be developed across other Departments. Obviously, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment would be significant in terms of supporting employability.

Regarding Spring Lane, I remember a Green Party convention in Cork - it must be 11 years ago - at which the Spring Lane group presented to us. The images are very similar to the images we saw when the Ombudsman did his report. Regarding my engagement in this, it has been discussed in NTRIS. We use our position in NTRIS to engage directly with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to get an update on its progress there and its progress on wider Traveller accommodation. With the Covid pandemic, I have not been out and about as much as I would like but I hope to be in a position to visit Spring Lane when I am on a visit to Cork at some point. Continued engagement to highlight the issues here from both a Traveller equality point of view and a children point of view is important to me.

Vice Chairman: Thank you. We must keep a focus on what we are trying to achieve, the big scene. Often we can get lost in the detail. Our objective has to be to build strong, equal, vibrant Traveller communities. Racial attitudes are incredibly negative towards Travellers and I have not seen any improvement. Equality issues are challenging every day. Accommodation, whether it is halting site or Traveller-specific, is not being dealt with. On the private market Travellers find it incredibly hard to get the housing assistance payment, HAP. For example, 50% of the homeless in Galway city are Travellers even though they are a very small percentage of the population. We know all the statistics about educational disadvantage; we could sing them now if we could sing. We know about employment, or lack of employment. We know that the health outcomes are horrendous.

I have the view, and I say this about many problems, that if meetings, structures, reports and evaluations actually changed the world, the world would be well changed by now and we would not be facing the same old problems. I will make the following specific points. Is it time we measured our results on the ground? Can we measure the actual improvement, year by year in, for example, accommodation, health, employment and so on? Should we spend more time getting down on the ground and finding out the Traveller community's perspective on the improvements they see in their lives? Having worked in a wide variety of areas, I am aware that people are fairly forthcoming if there are improvements. That is my first question. Are we measuring the inputs and the reports, as the Minister said, or are we measuring the actual outcomes for the community we purport to be targeting with assistance?

I am interested to hear the Minister's view on the following matter. He might outline wheth-

er he has a lead role across all Departments to bang heads together on delivery. Does he have, for example, the same powers as the Minister with responsibility for the islands traditionally had from 2002 onwards? The Minister with responsibility for the islands had funds and responsibility for things that might normally fall under the remit of other Departments, for example, transport services, including ferry services, or the building of piers on the islands. That was done directly by the Department with responsibility for the islands. That would be the equivalent of the Minister having the function to provide housing for Travellers. The Minister in that Department had funds to disburse across other Departments at will, as long as those other Departments were delivering. Does the Minister have a role as head of the lead Department, with the funds to go with it, to ensure this gets done or are we still depending on egging along each Department and local authority, and nobody is in control if those Departments do not take action? Would it be better if more funds were channelled centrally through one Department and one Minister had primary responsibility for making sure of delivery? My two questions are whether we measure actual improvements from the bottom up and whether we should change the structure at the very top so that the Government, which is answerable to Oireachtas Éireann, would have somebody with a primary role in this area with the funds to support them. Money controls a lot in this State. It is important that such a Minister would have control of those funds.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: It is absolutely essential that we measure from the ground up. I and, more important, the groups representing the Traveller and Roma communities, believe that the approach adopted has been too focused on inputs, as the Deputy said. There have been many inputs to Traveller and Roma policy in recent years. That represents an amount of progress from a time when this entire area was completely ignored, which it was ten or 15 years ago. There is a lot of focus on the area these days. We cannot measure tangible outcomes because the processes to do so are not in place. Even in their absence, I think we know from talking to Travellers and Roma that they are not seeing the tangible improvements in their lives. We cannot measure but, even without measuring, we know anecdotally there has not been progress. In order to get real achievement, we need not to be measuring anecdotally, we need to be measuring with real statistics and that is why I am focusing on putting in place the ability to capture that data. That is why, in the successor to the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy, NTRIS, we are going to put a focus on those measurable outcomes. We will have to discuss what they are. We want to make them easy to measure although we do not want to create a whole bureaucracy around measurements because that gets us away from essential delivery. Having key metrics is going to be important.

The Deputy asked whether I have a lead role in banging heads. My style is not to bang heads. I try to work with people, as much as possible. However, I do not have the lead funding role the Deputy described was in place for the Minister with responsibility for the islands. I have a reasonably small budget for Traveller supports, as I outlined earlier to Deputy Mitchell. I have a role through NTRIS and the steering group. I use my role to hear what Departments are doing. I then engage with Departments where I feel additional pressure or engagement are needed to achieve outcomes. For example, I have bilateral meetings with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, on a range of issues that span our Departments, from domestic, sexual and gender-based violence to support for refugee accommodation and support for children who are leaving care. Traveller accommodation is one of the issues we discuss in those meetings. Is it the best way to go? I do not know the answer to that question yet. We always need to look at how we can strengthen deliverables across Government, particularly in areas where responsibility can end up falling across a number of Departments. The origin of my Department was a feeling that responsibility for children's issues,

outside of education, was spread out across too many Departments. That is why those issues were centralised in my Department. That is what we are doing currently in terms of disability. There was a sense that responsibility for disability was stretched across too many Departments and that is why issues have been taken out of the Department of Justice and will be soon taken out of the Department of Health and centralised in my Department. We hope that will see better outcomes for persons with disability.

I am conscious that local authorities have experience and expertise to deliver housing. I keep an open mind as to who should have oversight for Traveller-specific accommodation. All I can say is that I am very conscious that, as a country, we are not doing enough to improve outcomes for members of our Traveller and Roma community. I am absolutely committed, as the non-governmental organisations in the sector know, to improving those outcomes.

Vice Chairman: The local authorities might have the experience but in places such as Labre Park and other places in many counties, nothing has happened for 20 years. Those local authorities are certainly not using their experience but we will say no more about that today. We will be coming back to that because it is the nub of issue, let us be honest about it.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister and his officials for being with us. I am particularly interested in youth services. We did a lot of work on the national youth justice strategy. I am wondering about the actions and interests concerning youth services and engagement with teenagers, in particular teenage Travellers, that pertain to the Minister's Department. Perhaps the Minister would give us an update. I think some of the actions in the strategy relate to youth services. What progress has been made in that regard? Youths and teenagers, in particular, are vulnerable, especially where mental health is concerned, in these times.

Deputy Joan Collins: I will emphasise one point. We had a private meeting earlier that Senator Flynn attended. She made the point that accommodation is key to everything else coming together. Accommodation would build the morale of the Travelling community and that of the children on the sites. It would build the morale of the communities around those sites. It would be like the working-class areas of Coolock 20 or 30 years ago, when they had a bad name. At that time, if you put Coolock down as your address, you never got a call from an employer. We have to concentrate on accommodation. That will lead to better mental health, better education and children having more respect for their communities.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Regarding what the Minister said, monitoring is key to keeping on top of this. As we have seen over the years, when revisiting issues on Traveller sites innumerable times, especially regarding accommodation and education, there are issues when we take our foot off the pedal. I agree that we need to make sure we have robust monitoring. That is key to keeping an eye on the local authorities and the actions taking place.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank the Chair and members for their engagement. Deputies Joan Collins and Ellis made a point about the importance of accommodation when addressing stability and security for Traveller families all over the country, living in low quality accommodation, whether social or private housing. It creates significant instability for them and their children and impacts on all other elements of life. I take the Deputies' point about accommodation and monitoring. They have my commitment that we will engage with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage about the measures it is undertaking to improve housing for Travellers.

Deputy Stanton might have seen that I recently launched the Traveller participation frame-

work. We had a group of Traveller children from youth services in Government Buildings. We had fun at the fountain that day. They were delighted to be in Government Buildings and to see the Taoiseach's office from where we were. We support the participation and the voice of young Traveller people, especially in existing participation frameworks such as Comhairle na nÓg, so that their voices can be heard. Another outcome is the Traveller participation and leadership strategy, which is funded by my Department. It identifies young leaders within the Traveller community and supports their personal development so that they can continue to develop as leaders of the community. UBU Your Place Your Space is a central targeted funding mechanism for youth services in my Department. It has initiated a number of Traveller-specific services. A Roma-specific service recently opened in Roscommon. We secured a €5 million increase in overall funding for youth services. I hope that some of that will benefit the Traveller and Roma communities.

I apologise. I have to run.

Vice Chairman: The Minister was running over time. We appreciate his attendance. I apologise about the beginning. As the Minister knows, with the rules of the Houses, we cannot start without a Senator, and there was an unusual event, with the Taoiseach addressing the Seanad.

Sitting suspended at 2.53 p.m. and resumed at 2.58 p.m.

Vice Chairman: I thank the Minister for attending the previous session. On behalf of the committee, I am delighted to extend a warm welcome to the witnesses for the second session. From the Department of Education, I welcome Ms Mary Cregg, principal officer in the social inclusion unit, and Mr. Brendan Doody, assistant chief inspector. We have to be strict about time because we are running over. I ask the witnesses to stick to ten minutes for their opening statement between them. We will then take questions from members.

Ms Mary Cregg: I thank the Chair and the committee for the invitation to attend to discuss the topic of school completion rates, the educational attainment of Travellers, especially when compared with those of members of the settled population, and related matters. My name is Mary Cregg and I am principal officer with responsibility for social inclusion in the Department of Education. My colleague, Brendan Doody, is assistant chief inspector in the Department.

The Department recognises that while improvements in Traveller educational outcomes have taken place in recent years, educational attainment among Travellers continues to lag significantly behind that of the general population in Ireland.

Analysis of retention data in the Department shows that close to 90% of Travellers progress to third year of post-primary schools. There has been an increase in retention to junior certificate, with 68% to 70% of those entering school in 2014 or 2015 completing junior certificate in 2017 and 2018, compared with 65% for those entering in 2010 and completing junior certificate in 2013.

The percentage completing leaving certificate remains low at 22%. It is known that a significant number of Travellers avail of options to continue education in Youthreach centres or avail of further education routes.

It is important that examples of good practice and innovation in schools, and in ancillary support services, are harnessed to improve the educational experience of Traveller pupils. The committee has asked for information on the pilot projects that have been put in place as one of

the actions under the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy. An update has been supplied in the Department's submission.

The pilot projects are only one of a number of developments that are aimed at supporting educational outcomes. A key objective of Traveller education policy in recent years has been the phasing out of segregated Traveller provision. Funding for segregated Traveller provision has been incorporated into overall school and other funding streams in order to provide supports for Traveller pupils in mainstream schools.

Budget 2022 has allocated the largest ever increase in funding for the DEIS programme to tackle educational disadvantage. The budget provided an additional €18 million in 2022 and €32 million in 2023, which will enable an expansion in 2022 of the programme to further schools. Not all Travellers attend DEIS schools and additional supports are available in all schools to support students with additional needs. These include special education teachers, special needs assistants and supports provided by the National Educational Psychological Service.

A Covid learning and support scheme, CLASS, has been put in place to help schools mitigate the adverse impacts of Covid-19 on student learning loss and well-being arising from the periods of school closures in 2020 and 2021. Provision is being made for up to €52 million in extra teaching hours for schools.

Under the 2022 dormant accounts action plan, funding of €500,000 has been allocated to the Department of Education to oversee projects that tackle educational disadvantage for Travellers and Roma. The Department supports inclusive education for all and actions that will ensure that the school setting is a more welcoming environment for all our students, including Travellers. All schools are required to engage in a self-evaluation process. School self-evaluation involves reflective inquiry leading to action planning for improvement that is informed by evidence gathered within each school's unique context. The process enables schools to use this evidence to identify meaningful and specific targets and actions for improvement that focus on teaching and learning practices. It enables them to create and implement improvement plans, measure their progress and identify their achievements.

By reflecting on what teachers teach and how they teach it, and on what pupils learn and how they learn, school management and teachers become aware that certain aspects of the education they provide are effective, and that improvement is needed in others. For example, in situations where attendance rates are problematic, schools have been advised to consider the extent to which current teaching approaches support good attendance. A similar approach has been advised where retention rates are lower than national averages. In addition, in DEIS schools this may also involve working towards ensuring improved partnerships with external agencies such as the school completion programme.

The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice promotes the provision of a whole-school approach to supporting well-being. It is an approach that has been found internationally to produce a wide range of educational and social benefits for individual children, and young people, including increased inclusion, greater social cohesion, increased social capital and improvements to mental health. Work is under way by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, arising from an audit of the curriculum in respect of Traveller culture and history. This is being done with a view to developing opportunities for teaching about Traveller history and culture, and developing resources for use in schools. The NCCA is also due to commence work in 2022 on a review of the intercultural guidelines for schools. This will

further facilitate schools to create an inclusive environment, including for Travellers.

While progress is being made, we still have work to do to as Traveller students continue to experience disadvantage in the area of education. My colleague and I are very happy to take questions from members.

Vice Chairman: I thank Ms Cregg and Deputy Stanton will commence our questions.

Deputy David Stanton: It is very good to see Ms Cregg again and I thank her for her presentation. I also thank Dr. Doody for his attendance.

I was around when the pilot projects were initiated and I am glad to see they are ongoing. Earlier, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth noted there had been problems due to Covid. I ask the delegation to give an overview of the projects. What exactly is happening on the ground? How do Traveller children experience these projects? What are the people involved actually doing? We have home school community liaison people on the ground and others. I ask the delegation to paint a picture of what difference the projects make for young Travellers, their families and schools.

Ms Cregg mentioned Youthreach. The local training initiatives are another area that young people go into when the system, as I say, fails them. I ask the delegation to comment on Youthreach, local training initiatives and those other pathways. We have heard from time to time that not everybody, not just Travellers but other students in the mainstream, find the academic leaving certificate as we know it at present to be the best way to go. There are other pathways and I ask the delegation to comment on them. How do these pathways assist and support Travellers and some others to find additional pathways to qualifications, jobs and so forth?

Ms Mary Cregg: On the pilot projects, at the outset a set of goals was set out based on consultation and in collaboration with the Traveller representative groups. They identified what they saw as the main issues that they felt needed to be tackled. The goals identified included supporting students; improving the learning experience for students; supporting parents; supporting schools to improve attendance, participation and retention; developing linkages with community and other services; and to consider gathering data and assessment in order to have an evidence base that would inform future policy.

In terms of what is happening on the ground, each team has a home school community liaison officer and an educational welfare officer or school completion worker. Each team has two members of the Traveller or Roma community working as a team on the ground in the four sites of Dublin, Cork, Wexford and Galway.

The initiatives that are put in place are planned at the outset of the year. We recognise that there are regional variations. We also recognise that there is local knowledge among the Traveller representatives in the various areas about the specific issues that might have an impact on attendance and education. They differ across the various areas and, on that basis, the teams try to be as innovative as possible. The teams involved have identified certain initiatives that they have trialled to see what does and does not work. Part and parcel of that is to consider this in an overall context and ensure that operational and practical supports are provided to parents. By practical things, I mean assisting parents in navigating how to use the communication tools from schools, building relationships and understanding the culture and being the bridge between the Traveller community and the schools. That is one of the things that schools have seen as one of the key benefits of this collaboration. We also bridge links to community supports.

Obviously Covid has had a huge impact on the normal school environment. Certainly the pilot teams were of huge benefit during the Covid period in terms of maintaining that connection with schools for the pupils involved.

There is a lot of practical work on the ground. There has been the development of resources that have been used locally in the schools. These resources were developed in conjunction with the Traveller organisations. There is also the introduction to Traveller culture and history within schools. That building of understanding is probably the key element that the informal feedback has given to us at this point in time.

Deputy David Stanton: I think Ms Cregg has said that the pilot projects have been successful so far, bearing in mind the interruption caused by Covid. Has the use of the restricted timetable been diminished? We have spoken about this issue previously because we are very concerned. I ask the delegation to comment on homework clubs as well. Have homework clubs been tried? I have visited a few of those homework clubs and I thought they were very impressive. They help young Travellers to get ahead of the posse, by having their homework done and having an understanding in order that when they go into school the next day, they know what is going on and are up with or maybe even ahead of their peers.

Ms Mary Cregg: Deputy Stanton will be aware of the previous engagement on reduced school days. The Department published guidelines in September which will come into effect in January. One of the issues with reduced school days was that there was no formal reporting mechanism. From 1 January, all schools will be required to notify the Tusla education support service when a reduced school day is put in place. We are aware of some situations in which a reduced school day can be a positive intervention, such as when a child has had a bereavement or might need to reintegrate into the school on a transitional basis for other reasons. We certainly wanted to balance making allowance for those sorts of situations with ensuring a reduced school day did not apply as a disciplinary measure or was not something that prevented a child from attending school. That has been a significant development. With regard to the Deputy's question on the gathering of data and to what extent they would have been in place, the data on the pilots will be gathered as part of a formal evaluation for which we will shortly be going out to tender.

NTRIS has strong links with homework clubs and while we would not necessarily want to be setting up homework clubs under the NTRIS pilot, we want to ensure that children have access to them where necessary. In Dublin, the pilot has strong links with homework clubs that are supported by City of Dublin ETB such as the St. Margaret's homework club pilot. I know the committee has visited the St. Margaret's site as well. In Wexford, students are directly accessing homework clubs in six of the schools. In Tuam, homework clubs are running in some of the schools and evening study and homework clubs in the secondary school. There are links with homework clubs and that has been seen as one of the initiatives in use for the pilot.

Youthreach is now under the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and I do not have the specific detail on that, but under the DEIS plan, schools in the DEIS programme will be specifically asked to focus on transitions and to look at linking in to those alternative pathways. However, the Department wants to encourage children staying within the mainstream system and being afforded the same opportunities at an equal level with other children across the system. Where that is not possible or where children are not in a position to continue in mainstream education, alternative pathways are available to them, Youthreach being one of them.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank Ms Cregg and Dr. Doody for their presentation. I was curious about the work under way in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, arising from the audit of the curriculum, on Travellers' culture and history. Is there any scope in that for training for teachers, to teach them best practice in dealing with Travellers? Is that part of it? Many teachers are very well in tune but are there special training programmes for them to bring them up to speed on that? The other big concern I have had for a long time is the percentage of people going on to leaving certificate level. It is approximately 22%. It is not far off that in my area and it is very worrying. Do we envisage any better ways of increasing that? You see people who are going to higher education like that. Do we have programmes there to supply them with computers or otherwise? Is there any extra help? They would not use Zoom that much. However, if they were to use it for education, can we do something like that, when it comes to higher education or trying to bring people on? Maybe that would help. St. Margaret's has the homework club and it is going well, because I have spoken to them several times. That is an example of how well it is working. It is often difficult to gauge the outcomes but, by all accounts, they are quite good.

Ms Mary Cregg: I will address the first question on the NCCA. This is very important work the Department is supporting. A full-time education officer is assigned to the NCCA who is a Traveller and has been doing significant work in this area. Broadly speaking, the initiative in the NCCA seeks to develop upon the audit, which was published by the NCCA in 2009, providing research and information on aspects of Traveller history and culture, gathering examples of practice and work from early years, primary and post-primary, that will support teachers in their work and also identifying resources and initiatives available to support teachers and practitioners. The NCCA is not itself responsible for training but the work being done by it feeds into the professional development service for teachers, which informs the work that happens in the classroom. The NCCA is also doing intercultural guidelines for schools. These were previously published approximately 15 years ago, but will be updated in 2022, given the changes that have taken place in the interim. That will also inform the continuing professional development for teachers.

There are a range of continuing professional development, CPD, initiatives, based on the concept of inclusive education, which have been introduced in recent years. CPD in social, personal and health education, SPHE, at primary and post-primary is continuing and through this, teachers can address teaching children respect for and appreciation of human and cultural diversity through the SPHE curriculum, for example. There will also be changes in initial teacher training. I will defer to my colleague, Dr. Doody, on that. I will also ask him to address the leaving certificate.

Higher education falls under the remit of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, but the underlying question is on ICT provision. The Department supplies funding to schools, which in turn can provide supports to students. Moreover, the Department will receive funding of €50 million under the national recovery and resilience plan and the details of that scheme will be announced shortly. There are ongoing efforts on that but the key piece is maintaining the links with schools, between the schools and the pupils.

Dr. Brendan Doody: Both Deputies have referred to the importance of homework clubs, which are key and integral elements of a young person's experience and should be as widely available as possible, as we know. I have a personal preference. We have significant experience of schools providing after-school clubs, rather than just the homework club, where the homework is attended to. Some of the best examples of provision I have seen in schools, espe-

cially in the DEIS context, are where the provision is categorised as after school. Yes, there is a homework element to it and it is critically important the young person gets that advanced leg-up in completing the homework. However, there are also great opportunities for other elements of a broader learning experience to be provided. We have seen schools where computer programming was provided in the context of an after-school club. Sport and recreation elements, arts activities and a whole range of things like that are critically important for all learners and especially for Traveller and Roma students.

One of the best examples I came across had an unintended consequence, which is important to reference. The school delivered an after-school club that ran until 5.15 p.m., and the unintended consequence of that among the parent body was that for the first time some of the parents, and the mothers in particular, felt empowered and enabled to go out and seek employment. When I met a group of parents from that school, they said that this after-school provision that was made available to their children had enabled them to go out and get jobs. In that community, they might be the first in several generations to get employment. That was a very important element of provision in that school which was working well. The homework club is important in and of itself, but it is part of a much broader package of supports for young people and there are possibilities that can be expanded in that set-up.

I have been involved with Youthreach since our very first involvement in 2005. The learner in Youthreach has changed considerably in many respects in that intervening period. In 2005, which was the very first time the inspectorate visited Youthreach settings for inspection purposes, we came across young people who had been excluded from school. There is no other way of dressing it up. In crude terms, they had been kicked out of school. Youthreach was a very good safety net for them and remains so for many young people today. However, what we have now is a lot of young people who are opting in to Youthreach. In other words, they seek it out. They face challenges in navigating their way through the post-primary system and, as Ms Cregg said, the challenge facing schools and the Department is to ensure that the capacity of all teachers and schools at post-primary level is maximised such that all learners experience an inclusive education experience.

On training for teachers, there are 350 teachers seconded to the Professional Development Service for Teachers, PDST. The latter is the body that is charged with delivering supports and training for teachers and it does it on a range of fronts and areas, at primary and post-primary levels. As new programmes and training are developed, the teachers can avail of a range of supports in that regard. It is not limited just to the PDST. One of the most significant education reforms in many years, as we are probably all aware, is the junior cycle. The junior cycle reforms, which have taken place and which are now being embedded in schools, are supported by the junior cycle for teachers support service. That is separate to the PDST but it is very specific to supporting post-primary teachers who operate at junior cycle level to embed the key skills of the junior cycle programme.

As the committee is probably also aware, senior cycle reform is a live issue in the Department of Education and for the Minister. It will seek to build on the revised approaches to learning in the first instance that arise in the junior cycle. The junior cycle places the student at the centre of learning and therefore removes the extent of the emphasis that has been heretofore placed on the terminal exam. It is about new ways of working and facilitating the development of those keys skills around managing yourself, managing communications and being literate, numerate and so on. Nobody knows at this point when exactly the senior cycle reform will be a live issue in our school system. There is a lot of work being undertaken at the moment to sup-

port senior cycle reform internally in the Department. My sense is that it will seek to build on the junior cycle reforms that are in place.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I thank Ms Cregg for her opening statement. My colleagues have covered many of the questions I was going to ask. Is there an employment or internship scheme in the Department of Education, similar to the one in the Department of Justice?

Vice Chairman: That is a very specific question.

Ms Mary Cregg: I am not aware of any scheme that currently exists. Pre Covid, the Department would have from time to time taken in students on transition year work experience but those were not formal internships. Mr. Doody may be able to add to that.

Mr. Brendan Doody: I am afraid I cannot. I am not aware of any specific scheme, although I know there was one in the past. I do not know what the current situation is. We can find out for the Deputy and revert to her but I am not aware of the detail of any specific scheme at the moment.

Vice Chairman: I have a number of questions. Ms Cregg stated that 90% of Travellers progress to third year in post-primary schools but the number who actually do the junior certificate is under 70%. My understanding is that students do their junior certificate after three years. This means that between going into third year of secondary school and actually completing it, we are losing 20%. Then percentage sitting the leaving certificate is 22%, which is down another 48%. My question is twofold. First, can the witness confirm that those figures are correct? Does the percentage drop to 22%, from 68% or 70% and 90% in under four years? The second part of that question is about how that compares with the settled community or society at large. What retention rates from junior certificate to leaving certificate have we got in that regard?

Ms Cregg also mentioned the additional allocation of €18 million to DEIS schools in 2022 and €32 million in 2023. However, that is not really Traveller-specific. Have we any measure of how much of that funding actually goes to Travellers, or is it just a global figure? There were cutbacks in Traveller-specific education provision back in 2011 and 2012. Does the Department have any idea how much money was there in that period? There was a specific allocation that disappeared out of the education system.

Some €500,000 has been provided by the dormant accounts fund to oversee projects tackling educational disadvantage for Travellers and Roma. Exactly how will that €500,000 be used to tackle that?

Ms Mary Cregg: There is a lot in that. I will try to address all the Vice Chairman's questions but forgive me if I miss something along the way. On the statistics, the figure of 68% to 70% retention to junior certificate is correct. Enrolment in third year is in or around 90% but not all of those children will progress to do their junior certificate. However, many of these children do progress and there has been an increase in progression over the years to both fifth year and sixth year. For example, of those who entered secondary school in 2015, around 65% of boys and 69% of girls progressed to fifth year. The progression rates to sixth year, although well below the national levels, have increased over the time. Of those children who entered school in 2014, 30% of boys progressed to sixth year, relative to 24% in 2010, and 50% of girls progressed to sixth year, relative to 42% in 2010. There has been an increase in progression over that four-year period. However, the retention level to leaving certificate of 22% is significantly less than the overall national average, which would be approximately 91.5%. It is

important to look at the increases that are there albeit that they are small but there are positive improvements. Obviously, there is a lot more work to do in that regard.

A question was asked about the dormant accounts funding, which is relevant in that context. A figure of €500,000 has been allocated to the Department of Education. It is intended that €100,000 of that will be for transition supports to be provided by Tusla education support services in that high-risk area of the transition between junior and senior cycle and that €400,000 will go to local community engagement projects building on what we have seen to date as building those relationships. The actual determinants of that scheme will be published in due course. That is the breakdown of the €500,000. That is not to say that €500,000 is the only investment from the Department of Education in education supports for Travellers.

Vice Chairman: I know that is just specific dormant account funding.

Ms Mary Cregg: That is correct. The €150 million of expenditure on DEIS across 884 schools will increase €180 million. This will enable the expansion of DEIS to additional schools. Some work is being done regarding the model and the communication of the model but what we have tried to do is examine, and this was outlined as part of the original DEIS plan, how we identify those students who are most at risk. What we are trying to do with DEIS is to make sure that where there are high concentrations of students from backgrounds of educational disadvantage, we encompass them within the DEIS model. Since we record Traveller ethnicity in schools, we will, in time, be able to show how much of the DEIS funding and how the DEIS model are targeting Traveller students. We know that at the moment, about 50% of Travellers attend DEIS schools. We would be able to specify that but the DEIS model involves looking at where there are high concentrations of people within an individual school.

A reference was made to 2011 and changes in the way resources were allocated within the Department. There were changes in how resources were allocated so resources were subsumed into the overall mainstream allocation along with the changes to segregated Traveller education overall. Since 2011, there have been significant increases in the assistance put in place within the system. In September 2021, 17,846 special needs assistant posts were in place with an additional 158 provided by the end of December 2021. This will result in over 18,000 special needs assistants. Details of €9.2 billion in funding were announced in budget 2022. This represents an increase of 81% in the number of special needs assistants provided since 2011 when there were only 10,575 in the system.

Budget 2022 also provided for an additional 145 special education teachers, bringing total provision to 13,765. This represents an overall increase of 40% in the total number of special education teachers allocated since 2011 at a time when there were only 9,740 teachers in the system. An additional 980 posts are provided for in budget 2022, of which 620 will provide additional support for children in mainstream schools.

It is important to look at this in the context of how supports were allocated within the system. Rather than taking things away, we have incorporated the supports that were available within the system into the mainstream system. We have also allowed schools the flexibility and autonomy regarding special education teachers to designate those teachers to those students deemed to need the support most. I will allow Mr. Doody to expand on that.

Mr. Brendan Doody: I am long enough in the Department to remember when we had 350 special needs assistants in our entire system and there was a feeling we might need 500. Next year, we will have 19,000 so there has been an enormous increase in the resource.

From the inspectorate's perspective, when we go into schools, what we want to see schools doing is applying the key principles underpinning the allocation model for special education resources. There are two principles that trump all others. The first is working towards meeting an identified need. We have moved away from labelling on the special education side of the house. Up to 2017, one needed to have a label to get any additional support or resource in a school. That was felt to be the wrong way to approach things. Therefore, the allocation model in 2017 changed completely to ensure that schools were given the resources based on a profile that would enable them to meet the needs of the children who most need support. It is about focusing on the identified need of the student.

The second requirement is key to all provision in school. The child with the greatest level of need should get the greatest level of support. That is the key principle underpinning the special education teacher allocation model. I should clarify that we are talking about children with special and additional needs. We are not just talking about children with a visual impairment or autism. The resource that is available to assist the school in meeting the broad range of needs but also the needs of children who have bobbed to the surface in terms of their needs and the presentation of those needs.

The Covid learning and support scheme, CLASS, is an additional measure put into the system. It recognises that at the moment there are children who may not previously have needed additional support and may have been just fine in terms of their engagement with learning, teachers and their peers but who, arising from their experiences of Covid, require additional support. We have put considerable additional resources into the schools such that they can work towards meeting the needs of children who might not have previously needed those additional supports or where a higher level of need is evident.

The principles that underpin the set allocation underpin the class programme as well. All of the additional programmes we put out into the system over the past 18 months to assist students with additional needs have been underpinned by those key principles. It is based on autonomy and the Department recognising that schools are better placed than we are to provide help tailored to their own context and student body. We have provided the resource and support and put a significant amount of work into giving guidance in the form of documents to support teaching and learning for children with special educational needs and guidance for children who are most at risk of educational disadvantage. We have put specific guidance into the system for young people attending Youthreach settings. The same principles underpin all of those. A school or centre of education needs to have a mechanism in place that will readily identify those young people with the greatest level of need and the resource should follow that particular need.

Vice Chairman: We have already established that 22% of the Traveller community get to the leaving certificate, which is 69% to 70% behind the rest of society. If islanders or Gaeltacht people, who are distinct communities, had that rate of disadvantage, we would focus specific extra funding in those areas. What we are talking about here is something that is available to everybody according to his or her need, which we all agree with, but we know there is a community that because of social attitudes, etc., needs extra help. I was around the system in 2010. I was not there in 2011 or 2012 as I was a backbencher. My memory was that we were cutting back at that time and the money was taken. How much in extra resources was subsumed into the system, or disappeared, which was my memory of it? We were all cutting back at that stage. How much did that cost? It is not that we should have continued with what it was being used for then, but I am just curious about how much money was specifically for this community, which seems to be at a massive educational disadvantage compared with all of the communities

in Ireland.

Ms Mary Cregg: The figure of 22% refers to students who take the leaving certificate within the mainstream school system. It does not include those who take the leaving certificate in other settings. For example, we have seen an increasing trend of students in Youthreach. In 2013, there were 109 students in Youthreach compared to 28 who entered in 2010. It is important to reference that the 22% figure is for the completion of the leaving certificate within the mainstream education system. I can come back to the Vice Chairman with specifics on the supports, but there is a Traveller-specific capitation, which is an enhanced capitation for Travellers that still exists within the system at a cost of more than €1 million. This continues to exist post 2011. Prior to 2011, there were resource teachers for Travellers in certain schools, but Travellers were not counted when we were looking at how we allocated teachers within DEIS schools. We were looking at the Traveller pupil within the DEIS school, but allocating resources based on the number of Travellers. Those Travellers are now counted as part of the pupil contingent within DEIS schools and those resources are still allocated through the DEIS programme. I can come back to the Vice Chairman with the figures.

Deputy David Stanton: I thoroughly agree with Mr. Doody's comments on the after-school clubs. At some of these clubs the children get food also when they go there, they have fun and they learn beyond the curriculum and their homework. I fully endorse what he said and I support that kind of activity, which is brilliant. There is an add-on that parents are able to go to work because they do not have to mind children, and this is a bonus. I say well done on that and anything we can do to support that initiative should be done. I thank Mr. Doody for clarifying and expanding on it.

Will Ms Cregg comment on the NTRIS and the various actions and responses of the Department? I understand that some actions are for the Department Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Can I assume that they are all covered at this stage? I am especially interested in two actions, one of which relates to anti-bullying, which I believe is No. 18, and the other is the Traveller education strategy, which was to be reviewed and some work was to be done on that way back in 2017. Perhaps she can outline where both of those are at.

Can she also give us any indication about the transition from primary education to second level education? Is there any dropout at that stage? There may not be, but it would just be interesting to know.

She mentioned the numbers who go on to Youthreach, further education, and apprenticeships after doing the junior certificate, and I thank her for that. Is there a tracking mechanism in place specifically for Travellers so that they do not end up doing nothing, which would be a big concern of ours if they were?

Ms Mary Cregg: The Department's actions are all either under way or significant progress has been made on a range of actions, including the work of the NCCA, which I have referenced, and the NTRIS pilot programmes.

There are two aspects to bullying. The Department commissioned research from the anti-bullying centre in DCU, which examined the effectiveness of the Department's anti-bullying procedures for Traveller students. That research is being finalised for publication. It does not reflect the prevalence of bullying within the system. There were only a small number of Travellers who responded to say that they had experienced bullying within the school system. The findings also indicate the experience of how schools reacted to it, both positive and negative.

That research is being finalised for publication. One of the key aspects that came through from it, which reflects the data and the statistics, is that Traveller children and their parents generally reported a positive experience in primary school but more difficulties as teenagers went through post-primary. This is not unexpected.

On anti-bullying measures, the Department is commencing a review of its anti-bullying action plan from 2013. This review will take account of developments and relevant research, including the baseline research from a NTRIS pilot. It will also take into account research that has been done by DCU. A lot of time has passed since 2013. The review will also give detailed consideration to recommendations contained within the Oireachtas joint committee report on school bullying. This will involve consultation and collaboration, including with various representative groups. The Department's inspectorate is currently prioritising the monitoring and gathering of information about the implementation of anti-bullying measures in schools, which complements this work. This will help with the overall piece of promoting a positive school culture and climate.

On the Traveller further education strategy, I believe that the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, referred to this in his earlier engagement with committee. We will work with the Departments of Children and Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The original report and recommendations for a Traveller education strategy were put together in 2006. We are completing a review of what has happened in the interim. This will inform what we will look at, in conjunction with the feedback from the Traveller representative groups and in the context of where we are at right now. There are gaps still. We know that 22% making it to leaving certificate level in mainstream schools is simply not in line with what happens with the rest of the population. We must look to see what are the issues that need to be addressed and targeted, in a systemic way, to ensure those completion rates are improved.

The Deputy asked about the primary to post-primary transition rate. The Departments retention reports look at those children who entered into post-primary and then made it to the leaving certificate. There is no composite report on primary to post-primary rates. The primary online database and the post-primary online databases, POD and P-POD, were introduced around 2016. Prior to that, Traveller education statistics were gathered in an aggregated fashion and, therefore, it is not possible to track. Certainly, as part of the work we will engage on as part of the overall NTRIS, we will look at the need for disaggregated data. We now have Traveller ethnicity as a self-identifier within the primary and post-primary online databases, so the facility is there now to look more closely at what we can do with the data we have. Interestingly, we are aware from a NTRIS pilot that a lot of the students do not self-identify as Travellers. That is something that we would want to examine to ensure that Traveller students are proud, and we would want to investigate the reasons behind involuntary self-identification. We are not forcing anybody to identify as a Traveller but we would like to reach a stage where people felt they would be proud and willing to self-identify as a Traveller within the system.

The primary to post-primary transition piece is something that we can look at. From previous data I am aware that the transition rate had increased steadily. It had been quite poor at one stage but it had increased, from figures in previous submissions to previous Oireachtas committees. At the moment we do not have a retention report. That is certainly something, in the context of disaggregated data, that we can look at.

Mr. Brendan Doody: It is fair to say, from an inspectorate perspective, that our conceptualisation of transitions has developed considerably over the years. The committee may be aware that we have an inspection model of DEIS provision in schools. One of the DEIS themes

is transitions and so on. One of the common experiences perhaps ten or 15 years ago was to ask schools about how many of their pupils had progressed to post-primary level, for example. Typically, the primary school principal would say that they had all transferred and progressed. One would not just tick the box, but it would be at that level.

We now have a far more nuanced understanding of transitions and we are very keen to push the notions of schools building on learning as an essential element of an effective transition. In the past, where one had the primary school being supported in the transition phase to go up to look at the science labs and whatever in the post-primary school, we are now pushing schools towards the concept of where that was fine, necessary and important, but it is more about how would one support, for example, the English or maths subject teachers to build on the learning that has occurred for primary school students.

In some of our programmes, the school excellence fund-DEIS programme, for instance, we have good examples of cross-sectoral learning becoming embedded in schools. I can think of one example where a primary and a post-primary school have developed a cross-sectoral approach to the development of mathematical skills. This should, in turn, support more effective transitions.

With specific reference to Traveller and Roma students, I highlight the fact that we held a transitions seminar for teachers earlier on this year. Ms Cregg might agree with me on this. It was the most positively received continuous professional development training engagement I have come across in my time in the Department and there were 700 teachers in attendance. The overwhelming response to the seminar was very positive, partly because we had Traveller and Roma students telling their stories around engagement with learning and the critical importance of the one good person. This is not to say that the rest of those in the schools were not good people, but this referred to the one good person who latched onto and identified their ability, supported them and so on as they made those transitions. It is pretty important that we have that more nuanced understanding.

Very briefly on bullying, Ms Cregg referred to the fact that the inspectorate is focusing on the issue of bullying between September and Christmas as we conduct a series of incidental inspections. It is also important to note that the chief inspector has been very keen - this will happen from January onwards - on whole-school-type evaluations. These involve whole-school evaluations, DEIS inspections, etc. There will be a clear statement as to a school's work in supporting anti-bullying measures in the school. We have questions on existing surveys of parents and of students themselves around bullying in the schools.

Vice Chairman: I thank Ms Cregg and Mr. Doody very much for attending. Perhaps some time in the future they will be able to meet other committees in person. Unless any member has anything urgent to raise, that concludes our business for today.

I ask members not to forget to forward their submissions on the draft report to the secretariat as soon as possible. At our next meeting on Tuesday, 23 November at 3 p.m., we will start the discussion of the draft report, which we have to complete next week. We will have two long sessions of work next week on that report. Go raibh míle maith agaibh agus tráthnóna maith agaibh freisin.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.54 p.m until 3 p.m on Tuesday, 23 November 2021.