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, 4 Nollaig 2025

Thursday, 4 December 2025

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	**Seanadóirí / Senators**
Dessie Ellis,	
Tony McCormack,	
Naoise Ó Muirí,	
Aengus Ó Snodaigh,*	
Pádraig Rice.	

* In éagmais / In the absence of Deputy Maurice Quinlivan.

Seanadóir / Senator Malcolm Noonan sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session at 12.34 p.m., suspended at 12.35 p.m. and resumed in public session at 12.38 p.m.

Community Leadership and Advocacy: Discussion

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): Apologies have been received from the Cathaoirleach, Deputy George Lawlor. The witnesses are all very welcome. I remind all those in attendance to ensure that their mobile phones are on silent mode or switched off.

As we are within the precincts of Leinster House, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentations they make to the committee. This means they have an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything said at the meeting. However, they are expected not to abuse this privilege and it is my duty as Cathaoirleach to ensure it is not abused. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

Members are also reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or entity outside of the Houses, or an official of the Houses, either by name or in such a way that makes him or her identifiable.

On the agenda for today's meeting of the committee is an engagement with the Irish Traveller Movement to discuss community leadership and advocacy. Our witnesses are Mr. Bernard Joyce, director, and Ms Jacinta Brack, national policy and advocacy co-ordinator. They are most welcome here to our committee meeting this afternoon. I invite Mr. Joyce to make an opening statement.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I thank the committee members. We welcome the opportunity to speak on community leadership, advocacy, cultural recognition and hate crime legislation. While our written submission outlines the breadth of issues under consideration, I will focus my remarks on two central themes, namely, community leadership and advocacy and Traveller culture.

I will start with our struggle to secure fundamental rights and freedom from racism and inequality. As director of the Irish Traveller Movement, my leadership has been nurtured and supported through community development and forged in the struggle for the realisation of Traveller rights on this island. It is this foundation that makes our leadership not symbolic but lived, essential, and transformative.

Our struggle is to secure fundamental rights, freedom from racism and inequality, recognition of our culture and fair access to housing, health, education, and employment. I remind members that these are not privileges but rights, owed to our people. It shapes our decisions, strengthens our membership and drives our vision for a fairer, more just Ireland. Our ambition is clear: to be more, to do more and to achieve more for ourselves, for our community and for generations to come and this requires ongoing leadership.

Traveller community development work is co-dependent with the Government as a vital partner to sectoral bodies in delivering better community outcomes. The implementation of Traveller-specific strategies and plans and sustained investment in local structures to tackle long-term intergenerational inequalities is necessary. This will help the enablement of Traveller organisations as part of broad civil society partnerships to ensure Travellers are

listened to and taken account of across mainstream Government planning and resourcing, to redress disadvantage and exclusion, one element of which also provides the foundation for community leadership.

National and local Traveller organisations affiliated with the Irish Traveller Movement uphold Traveller leadership and drive advocacy rooted in a groundup focus. Yet, challenges continue to impede the growth of Traveller leadership within the sector. We face a complex landscape of demands, set against a backdrop of inadequate and insecure investment. Organisations are struggling to meet the dual pressures of community needs and governance requirements, while also responding to crisis interventions that remain under-resourced and unsupported elsewhere. Without sustained investment and structural support, Traveller leadership risks being constrained, despite its proven capacity to deliver change and justice for our community

Two weeks ago, at the Irish Traveller Movement national conference, members were asked to identify the three most significant challenges facing their organisations. They highlighted securing sustainable funding, namely, persistent difficulties in obtaining and maintaining the financial resources necessary to support organisational stability and growth. The second was balancing funder priorities with community needs, which leads to increasing pressure from funders to prioritise service delivery over community development, resulting in reduced autonomy and limited space for critical advocacy. The third challenge members identified was having to respond to overwhelming demand and a constant state of firefighting to meet the high level of need within local communities, leaving little capacity for strategic planning or long-term development.

In 2019 the much-welcomed five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector envisaged a direction of travel for Government policy for community and local development and for the community and voluntary sectors. We are aware that another five-year strategy is being developed as we speak. For Travellers and for people more broadly, outcomes were limited. However, investment for Traveller projects in Clare, Kilkenny and Limerick was significant and put those groups on an independent footing. Sadly, over that time two local Travellers organisations have ceased operating and 12 other Traveller CDPs are still without the means to operate under community development principles, subject to other funding means.

Two critical objectives did not materialise. The first is the strategy to scope and develop a sustainable funding model, that is, a multi-annual funding approach as the standard for community development. The second is the development of an appropriate cost-recovery model for public-funded programmes delivered by community and voluntary organisations, including costs of compliance and relevant overhead and administration costs. The threat of erosion of community development at a local level reduces Travellers and disadvantaged communities' capacity to effectively engage and have their voice heard and respond. It is vital that the Government supports and resources community development.

On the matter of Traveller culture, there are two important elements we want to raise. These are correcting historical cultural erosion and safeguarding for now and the future. Currently there are 15 specific actions earmarked in the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy. Six of these relate to the much-needed progression of equality and diversity standards in media and digital sectors and those are aligned with European directives. The Irish Traveller

Movement advocated with then heritage Minister, Senator Malcolm Noonan, for a Traveller heritage strategy, which is well under way and which we welcome. Moreover, we note that representatives from the council were recently before the committee. However, the plan to preserve, promote and safeguard Traveller culture in recognition of its special uniqueness is not there, and there has never been specific investment. National and local Traveller organisations, with a couple of exceptions, are also not resourced to work in the area. This undermines the value of culture and heritage as a complementary component to the combating of racism and discrimination. We have also referred in our submission to the need for progression on Traveller culture and heritage in education and to the dialogue and investment outstanding to underpin Traveller tinsmithing and language, included on Ireland's UNESCO inventory of intangible culture. Despite the recommendation of the expert review report of 2019 to review the criminal trespass legislation, nothing has materialised on this or on the State dialogue needed, in view of Travellers' historic experience, of Government practices and policies.

We are asking for the State to honour its commitments to resource Traveller organisations properly in each local authority area, and to ensure Traveller voices are not only heard but acted upon. Chair, we are conscious of time and are happy to take any question on these themes, and on the area of hate crime.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): Thank you, Bernard, that is much appreciated.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank Mr. Joyce for his opening statement. I have been working with the Traveller community for many years. I see a lot of things and it sometimes worries me considerably that with all the community development work that has been done over the years it appears that there is not an awful lot of improvement nationally in areas such as housing, health or equality. This has been highlighted here by many witnesses. Mr. Joyce has reiterated the same things. I can give examples. If we look at St. Margaret's in my area, the community hall, with its facilities where the residents could engage is gone. In Villa Park it is the same thing. The community hall is gone. The community hall in St. Joseph's was lost a good number of years ago. It shows that there are so many things wrong that have not been tackled. It is quite frustrating.

Mr. Joyce mentioned a number of things. I come across an awful lot of issues, particularly local ones in the halting sites. These are totally underdeveloped. They are bursting at the seams for lack of housing. Not enough resources or money is being put in there. That is really worrying.

I also want to ask about the hate crime legislation. Has this been used very much? I find that there is still discrimination out there and that it is still a very big issue. Has it ever been used in any way? There is a review of the criminal trespass legislation at the moment.

What will that deliver for us? What would be the advantages if that was passed, and the expert review group put in a report? What should we get out of that? It is very important. As I have said many times, we need to maintain and keep the Traveller culture. We need to show the whole history of the Traveller movement including the different issues, all the different things and the language. All those things are so important.

Sometimes it is frustrating because we do not see enough being done. I do not want to sound critical because obviously there are some areas where there have been improvements. There have been improvements in the schools dealing with the children from the Traveller community. However, there is so much more to be done. Child poverty is a huge issue.

The other issue for me is the suicide rate in the Traveller community, particularly among young men. It is the highest, as it is with women. It is quite worrying. Do we see anyway that can be addressed in a better way, maybe on some of the sites across the country and not just in my area? We probably need to have programmes and to bring them into the schools. I know there is a certain amount of that being done but it is not anywhere near enough.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I thank the Deputy. There are a number of questions there. Maybe between myself and my colleague Ms Brack we will cover both. I suggest she might cover the hate crime questions, and I will take the questions on community development and the criminal trespass legislation, which also relates to community development in terms of the projects Deputy Ellis mentioned.

The Deputy's first question was whether the changes have served the community with regard to houses, accommodation and those issues. Community development itself is not the outcome, it is a process. Community is about enabling, bringing and working with people. It is a tool to bring about transformative change, but it is not the factor in terms of change itself. That is part of mobilisation, engagement, participation and ownership. As I mentioned in my opening statement, without that approach of nurturing and support I probably would not be here now as the director of the Irish Traveller Movement. There is a requirement to support people by enabling them and showing them how we work together, how we bring our movement together, how we transform and how my struggle is certainly the struggle for others. For a long time, the community was singled out as the issue. When the community starts to come together and share the information, we begin to realise we are not the issue. We are all experiencing the same issues, despite not having actually met and being in different parts of the country. When we started to do that, we began to see that we were being singled out and excluded, and we found that our lived experience was quite difficult because we were facing levels of societal and institutional racism.

That brings me to the question of how we enable a community that is so much on the margins to start to mobilise. It is not unique to Travellers for a people to be pushed to such a degree that they want to push back. We saw that in the demonstrations of the Catholic population in Northern Ireland and the civil rights movements in America. We see it with different indigenous communities, including First Nations Australians. This is not new. It is not surprising that Travellers would take it upon themselves to start to mobilise. Mobilisation is a tool that forms part of a movement of change. We are instigators of that change. We use these tools to start to push back and to demonstrate that the inequalities that exist are inequalities that are not acceptable. I remind members of the committee that for a long time racism was not actually acknowledged in Ireland. It was Travellers who started to raise racism at a time when people felt racism could not exist because Travellers were Irish and were not seen as a people with a culture, an identity and a way of life. That was only formally recognised in 2017 after a campaign of 30 years. It was one of the longest campaigns in the history of the State. It took a whole community of people to campaign for that recognition.

As I speak to members here, I am speaking as an Irish Traveller with recognition of my identity, culture and history intact. That shapes how we move forward. I believe that certainly would not have happened had we not got the tools to bring that about. I acknowledge that this morning the Irish Traveller Movement in north Cork is celebrating the completion of the first young Traveller leadership programme. There are 17 young Traveller women who participated in that. That is a demonstration of leadership. It demonstrates that we want to bring our young people forward, that we have to work and that we need investment and supports. It is a vision of how we want to move forward in participation and decision making. It shows that there is a new generation of young people who will be sitting in these Chambers going forward.

What is happening in Ballymun and other areas is probably a systematic failure in resources, governance, oversight and planning. These are issues that are happening. Sadly, Ballymun is one of the areas that has collapsed. I was well aware of it. I am also aware there is another process in place around engagement to re-establish some form of structure and support for the community in the Ballymun area. Dublin 17, which is Coolock, is another area that has been re-established. A really positive process is taking place. In Finglas I think there is a local Traveller movement, but I am not sure how strong it is. Resources are very thin on the ground. That is why it is so important to see investment under community development being rolled out. I mentioned three areas, the first of which was Senator Noonan's area of Kilkenny, which is really positive in terms of the Kilkenny Traveller movement. The second, in County Clare, has seen the establishment of a community development project under SICAP. The third, Limerick, is really important because it is the third largest population centre in Ireland. It is really important that there is local infrastructure, support and investment. The point I am trying to make is that there is not enough. While we are talking about investment in new areas, we must also support existing projects. Following the dismantling of the community development programme many years back, that has never been replaced. There is a strategy and a plan currently in place, but we need to see top-level strategic oversight and leadership within the Department and by the Minister to ensure progression is invested in for grassroots supports, particularly for the most marginalised and excluded communities in Ireland.

Before I pass over to my colleague, Ms Brack, to cover hate crime, I would like to add that we would describe the criminal trespass legislation as anti-nomadism. In terms of formal recognition of Traveller culture, it is really challenging that as a community in Ireland we still do not have the right to be nomadic.

We cannot be ourselves as a Traveller community and move freely from one county to another. There are no resources or supports currently *in situ*. The criminal trespass legislation criminalises people if they find themselves on public or private land. There is a 24-hour notice. If you do not move, it becomes a criminal offence and anybody - a mother, a father or both parents - can be brought to court and their home can be impounded. The question is this: why is that not changing? It is probable that there is not the support politically to make that change. We went back to the Minister at the time regarding the change but there was no further progress in terms of the changes required. There was a recommendation in the expert report to repeal it. We have not seen any progression on that particular change in legislation. I want to note that for the record. We have been advocating at every level, including the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the committee against racism, UN bodies and at a national level for a change in the legislation. We continue to advocate for that change.

Ms Jacinta Brack: In the context of outcomes since the hate crime legislation was introduced, there is no co-ordinated approach to picking up the data. That is a problem. In its sixth cycle report, which was published in November, the European Commission Against Racism reminded the State of its obligation to record data. In its previous report, it had called for the State to ensure that happened. It is an important basis of understanding. It is important to note how much of challenge it is for sectoral bodies to ensure Traveller inclusion across a wide range of what should be protective measures. In the particular area of hate crime legislation, we had to advocate for Travellers to be named and therefore be specifically included in that legislation. There is an interaction between that legislation and digital services with regard to Travellers who experience hate online. We have been calling for better planning for alignment between all of the safeguards currently in place. With regard to Ireland's online safety code, we had to advocate for Travellers to be named. They are named now but only in two parts of the code. I am trying to demonstrate that it is not a given that Travellers are included across a wide set of protective measures.

We do not yet have any outcome reporting. What is needed and directly related to that is a level of action planning for an element of public engagement with it as an Act, and access to vindicating your rights under the Act. That has not been made clear since its enactment. I will explain what that might look like. A community public awareness strategy about the Act might show where people go to take a case regarding a hate crime or to make a complaint. Currently, you can to the Garda to report a hate crime. We have a difficulty in identifying the number of Travellers who would be affected by that because the information is not disaggregated intersectionally. If you look at the outcome reporting, you will see that race is the main theme under which we think Travellers are reporting but Travellers are not actually identified within that. A lot of other groups are included in that as well. It is important as an outcome to this important legislation that there is a national action plan on hate. That action plan should be developed in partnership with communities, particularly the communities most affected by it. There should be a co-ordinated, evidence-informed and human rights-compliant strategy to tackle online and in-person hate. The elephant in the room here is that the incitement to hatred element of what had been intended to culminate in a wide protection from hate did not materialise, despite the programme for Government commitment to it. The European Commission is looking at Ireland's reasoned opinion, which was submitted to it. There has been a series of dialogues between the Department of justice and the Commission. As we understand it now, it is over to the Commission to decide whether Ireland has fully transposed all of elements of the directive in its current position. It will be interesting to see the outcome of that. Meanwhile, the online and in-person hate that Travellers experience cannot be underestimated. There is no safeguard for that because the threshold is sometimes so high for a hate crime to exist, notwithstanding the continuous bombardment of hate online, in speech or in rhetoric that we have seen over many years. We hope the incitement to hatred element that has not been provided for will be.

I would like to respond to the question the Deputy asked about culture. I know the Heritage Council was before the committee recently. We were happy to see some of the outcomes of that. We advocated strongly with the former Minister of State, Senator Noonan, for a first-time Traveller heritage strategy. As Mr. Joyce said, we welcome that. As has already been said, there are some very positive programmes that are complementary in that space. Creative Ireland has a Traveller health and well-being strategy and the Arts Council has tried to ring-

fence some funding for Travellers in the arts. The national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy tries to take a view of calculating how this may be considered on a quota-type basis for Travellers in order that a certain proportion of funding is allocated under Traveller-specific measures. We would definitely welcome that. The real missing element is the engagement of the national cultural institutions. The Heritage Council is so important to this process. As Mr. Joyce said, it is about an element of Traveller safeguarding in the context of our national story, given that Travellers are Ireland's only indigenous minoritised community. We need to see that in the telling of our story abroad and here in Ireland. It has an important role to play with regard to combating racism and discrimination. It is not just about being seen as a very elevated message at national level - all of those things are important - but also about making sure local communities get the benefit of being able to resource that work locally for local projects. We look forward to the heritage strategy but we also think national cultural institutions have to be part of a conversation with regard to that.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): It is an important recommendation.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I would like to ask about all the different bodies - Pavee Point, the Heritage Council and the Irish Traveller Movement. Do they come together and weigh up what the problem is? It was said that a lot of work is being done in certain areas but not in others. Does that happen? The example was given of St. Margaret's. I have been in St. Margaret's talking to the residents. There seems to be a breakdown across the board in some areas. In my area, my God, there is a terrible breakdown in some areas. They might be fine down in Limerick or somewhere else. There might be good things going on but it is a question of weighing up where the problems are and putting more concentration on them. Does that happen? Do they meet regularly?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: That is a good question. We have to meet up to plan both at a national and local level. As director, I meet the other organisations regularly. We meet and have conversations particularly in terms of the direction we are going in and the work we are doing. We are all under significant pressure with resources all the time. Therefore we do not want to duplicate what is already happening across other areas. When we are developing our strategy in the Irish Traveller Movement, we engage with local and national organisations to determine the directions we need to take and focus on. To give an example, employment and enterprise is an area we are working on because we are aware that in other areas they may not have the same lead. We will work in that particular area along with the Traveller apprenticeship programmes, which the Deputy might be aware of, in terms of bursaries and supports. We are also taking a lead in youth leadership and participation to develop that area along with other organisations that might also be involved. Part of that involves trying not to duplicate what other organisations are doing. Some organisations might take a strong lead with the HSE and the Department of Health in terms of health, while the Irish Traveller Movement might take a strong lead on accommodation.

We would certainly lead out in certain areas and become focused on those areas so all the organisations do not take on all the same particular area of work. That is strategic, it is really helpful but also shows we are using resources the best we can, given the resources we have available are limited. I hope that answers the Deputy's question.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): I thank Mr. Joyce. I have a quick question while I am in the Chair, though I do not want to take over ground from members. There was mention of the community development programmes and their dissolution back in 2009 and 2014. There have been a number of pilot CDPs. Has the ITM or ITM-affiliated organisations availed of some of the roll-out of the pilot? Again, mentioning Kilkenny is interesting because it was one of the few counties that retained its LAG status under the 2014 review. That autonomy helped it get that specific focus on Traveller development.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: The question is around the CDP. The roll-out of the community development programme is very welcomed. Three organisations have applied over the course of different years: Limerick, Clare and Kilkenny. That is really positive. Of course we would like to see local supports in each and every county. It is a bit like what Deputy Ellis said in terms of particular areas that there needs to be a focus on investment and support. At the moment there is not enough and the Irish Traveller Movement could certainly be supportive and lend help to the areas we know there is a lack of support and investment. In areas like Louth, in Dundalk and Drogheda, there are absolutely no resources in terms of investment and supports. In certain areas in County Cork, which is the biggest county, while there are Traveller organisations there is no core investment in supports in those areas, along with the midlands and other areas.

We are aware there are supports under the old CDP in terms of ring-fencing funding under more administration in terms of the national Traveller partnership but there is no growth, no development and no sustained plan. That is obviously a concern for the sector to ensure the principles of community development are being applied, which have served. Obviously there needs to be investment and support for it to come forward, but it also needs to have leadership and we must ensure that leadership is driven when it comes to plans and strategies. We talk about strategies and plans but it is really about having the foresight and vision to ensure the very communities who are so removed from democratic and societal participation at a local, regional and national level find spaces and supports in a way that allows community voices to be heard, to participate and engage in full. That could be on Heritage Council strategies or plans in terms of the local community development areas around community safety and public participation networks. All these areas requires supports and resources, including the structures both national and local. We are constantly bombarded with requests from every single Department to respond, and even today in terms of Oireachtas committees, and we want to bring our groups and members with us but they need to be resourced and supported to do that. That is the challenge. That is something that needs to be prioritised and supported.

Deputy Pádraig Rice took the Chair.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank both witnesses for coming. I just have one question really. The witnesses are in leadership positions in advocacy. How do they find the local authorities' responsiveness? Are they consistent in the way they work with the ITM? There was mention of areas where, say, the movement's representative groups are not that strong. There are certain geographical areas where naturally it is not the case. Do the local authorities work well in those areas with those structures? How do the witnesses find them to work with? I am interested because sometimes I hear there is a huge disparity, in that some of the local authorities are good and some are not. I would like the witnesses' view on that.

Ms Jacinta Brack: Travellers, and we as community advocates, come to interact with local authorities in a number of places. Obviously the housing area is a big one for us. Some of the arts funding now goes through it and there are some of the primary healthcare projects, so there is a lot of interaction with local authorities. The bit where Travellers are not being visible, present, engaged, talked to and enabled is in that space. It is in the representation space. That could be in something like the strategic housing policies, and the expert group on Traveller accommodation made a recommendation the local Traveller accommodation consultative committees, LTACCs, might become incorporated into the strategic housing policies.

It is in other places too. If we think of some of the enterprise committees at local authority level, Travellers are not on those. Even in the five-year strategy for the community and voluntary sector, the leading conduit in the local area setting was the public participation networks. Travellers are typically excluded from those. I say "excluded" rather than "not included" because a very particular profile of local representative - not elected obviously - tends to come onto those committees. That is really important because it sets the agenda at the local authority level for some of the other processes Travellers should be included in, whether it is enterprise or other things.

The engagement is different in different ways. Obviously there is a tension point in the housing area and sometimes that might have set a tone and an agenda at the local authority through social workers, caretakers, on site or whatever, to have this residual tone about how to engage with the community. Unless it is structured and planned - local Traveller organisations are engaging with local authorities all the time - we do not do so much of that at all. Where there are good relationships it works really well, so it is important to see what the impediments are to some local Traveller engagement or local Traveller organisation engagement. As Mr. Joyce said, without the investment for local Traveller organisations it prevents them from doing a lot of good work to participate at other levels and to see outcomes for the community, as Deputy Ellis said. The outcomes for the community are nationally driven through the advocacy groups, like us, but they are driven locally as well and those organisations have to be enabled to do that with resourcing and investment.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: The public participation network, PPN, side is a very important starting point but it sounds like Ms Brack is saying it is not really open. She is saying that, whether deliberate or not, there is an exclusion there in terms of representation. How do we change that?

Ms Jacinta Brack: There is a review under way I know they had an open consultation and a targeted one. The Irish Traveller Movement took part in a consultation with the facilitators of that, so we are hoping that informs some of the potential changes, but it is about direct inclusion. Ring-fencing quotas for minoritised communities in different participative models is a blunt instrument, but unless it is there it will not happen.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Does Ms Bracken think that is best?

Ms Jacinta Brack: It is one way.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It would be a way that would achieve it.

Ms Jacinta Brack: It would be one way. The engagement of local sectoral bodies is so crucial to that because it is not just identifying somebody based on their identity as being a

Traveller, it is also identifying somebody who can be supported and resourced to be in that role, to be in the representative space. That is another element to it as well. I saw the terms of reference for those committees quite a while ago and the whole thing needs to be restructured and reviewed. I hope that will happen under what will be the five-year strategy for that.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Okay, I thank Ms Brack.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig Rice): I have a number of questions to ask. Every time I speak here I talk about the broader concerns and week after week we hear about the scale of human rights issues, the health challenges, the education challenges and the employment issues. It has become clear over the weeks how much work needs to be done, how much State investment is required and how many historical wrongs need to be righted. There is no doubt there is huge pressure on the witnesses' organisation and others to do a lot of that work. It is clear the State has really failed Travellers across decades.

It has failed to invest in services and has failed in terms of education, housing and employment opportunities.

My questions are on the funding of the ITM and other organisations. How much funding does the ITM require to do the kind of work that needs to be done? It is probably stuck in firefighting mode all the time and not able to do some of the longer term work and some of the important community development work. My own experience is I worked for two years managing a community development project in Cork working with the LGBT community. There is great importance in being able to respond to community needs, set up community groups, bring people together in a way they want and establish those connections. That work needs to flow. It is sometimes unstructured and cannot be dictated by others. It has to be dictated by the community in responding to needs. Flexible funding from the State is needed in order to facilitate that. It is really important work that has benefits over generations. The State undervalues that and has undervalued it for a while. That needs to change. It would be interesting to hear about funding. Does the ITM have a figure? Has it asked Departments? What responses has it got?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: That is a key question. The whole Traveller sector is completely under-resourced to such a degree that people feel very fatigued and tired. There is a sense this is not sustainable. People come to work and bring the work with them. They are in it because they believe this is more than work. It is a commitment and a way of life. It is a drive in terms of what they want to see change. It is also important that people are not taken advantage of within that drive, passion and commitment. Our conference was two weeks ago, where people came and said that they are firefighting. The issues coming in are the same issues elected representatives hear about day to day basis, only Travellers might not be good at knocking on their doors at a local constituency level. They do not have basic facilities in terms of homelessness, mental health and education. It is also about how they are treated day to day basis in terms of racism, discrimination and access to education. All of those issues are landing on organisations in which the community is employed in or is part of.

I remind people that local organisations have an autonomy. They are independent. Our members locally have their own autonomy and boards of directors. Those boards of directors are Travellers who are appointed to the board. They have their lived experience. They are indicating, advising and supporting on that, including some of the advocacy work that is

required. Some groups might well have two people employed to cover so much ground. There is no biennial funding. They might have somebody on a contractual basis from year to year, with no guarantee their employment will continue subject to funding of the second year. For example, the Irish Traveller Movement cannot give any staff member a contract beyond one year. It does not go beyond that. It is from year to year and is subject to funding; you will see that. We have to manage our budgets from year to year in terms of what we can do, what we have to curtail and what is manageable.

There are areas we certainly cannot cover. At the national level, for example, we do not have a national education policy officer, yet we respond to national policy. Ms Brack can vouch for the level of policy required across all the different areas. You would nearly think 20 people are working in that area in the Irish Traveller Movement, but we are a small organisation. There is a deficit in the area of equality and social justice. One of the biggest issues facing the community is racism at every single level. I remind people that Travellers have to navigate their lives in such a way as to avoid certain locations, places, events and sports just to avoid discriminatory practice. They are trying to navigate in a local area where they may not go into the local sports club, the local pub or certain shops because of the experience of being subjected to racism. People do not realise to what level that transpires. It is not being recorded. We would love to record it. We would certainly like to record that but it is not being reported. It just becomes part of everyday life. That is unfortunate.

There was a recent event for which a young Traveller had gone on to the quarter-finals. It happened that the event was moved to another venue. People were asked whether they would mind if the time was changed to an earlier time, specifically for this person, because otherwise the venue would not hold the event for the whole tournament. This Traveller was asked to compromise their right to be treated equally. The time for their family to come was 2 p.m. but the big social event would be from 7 p.m. to midnight. That family asked us what they could do and what advice we could offer. People are navigating and trying to manage the situations that are there but, in the work we do, we cannot give a commitment beyond year to year. There is no biennial funding. That is what I am getting at.

We would like to see longer term investment and investment in the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy, NTRIS, II that is being reverted to. There is no budget allocation to NTRIS II. We have not got our budgets yet. We will not know from the Department in 2026, probably in January or February, what our budget will be, but my sense is there will be a 3% to 4% cost in the budgets. That is nowhere near what we need. Therefore, we have to curtail or pull back certain areas of our work, whether it is policy or education. We are limited in terms of the accommodation we are trying to lead out in. That puts us at a disadvantage in what we are trying to do.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig Rice): It is really hard to keep people in jobs when you cannot give them security or long-term tenure. In some of the other areas, people have long-term contracts, pensions and entitlements. They stay in roles for decades and offer their expertise but when people are waiting, they get anxious about whether their contract will be renewed or they will have a job next spring. It is a really hard way to keep people. In a broader sense, the investment needs to be massively increased. This was a point I made to the Department of Health when it was here. It cannot be small percentage increases. We need

to see a massive expansion. If we want to address the health inequalities and other inequalities, there needs to be a serious long-term investment by the State.

It is probably worth, collectively with those who work on these issues, coming with a figure for what the scale of investment required to address many of those challenges and having a serious conversation with the State, Department and Ministers about the scale of investment required over the longer term to address some of those inequalities. Organisations cannot be left in precarious situations, doing firefighting and addressing these huge needs.

Ms Jacinta Brack: To add to that and to what Mr. Joyce said, sectoral investment is so important. The fact is that under NTRIS every year, each of its 80 thematic actions and nine thematic areas are led at the responsible level by the Minister at that Department. We need a better understanding of how the annual budget works *vis-à-vis* how each Minister and their Department are developing their budget estimate system. We do not have a sense of what they are looking for in order to deliver on the actions. When it comes to the end of the year, not only do we not know what our organisation's funding will be, we do not know what the investment is under the plan, which we have, in a way, brought the community with us on to say these series of actions are part of a whole national programme of things.

As the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach will know, these cover everything from the employment end of the work to the education end of the work. We are shooting in the dark all of the time. The most significant thing is that the Dormant Accounts Fund had been used as a prop for some of this work, definitely in the past three to four years. There is a fear that there may be some level of tapering off in that. It is about an independent ring-fenced structure for the NTRIS as a national policy programme. It should be seen in its own right and put forward every year as part of the budget Estimates in the same way as other components of Government Departments and other action plans and programmes. We cannot see that at the moment.

The other point to make, which Mr. Joyce has mentioned, relates to staff retention in the sector. Pay parity is off the scale. Where national organisations are funded by Government Departments, the salaries for those positions are often much lower than those of people working at the same level within those Departments. There is no fairness for people working in the sector. It has been very difficult to retain people in the NGO sector because of that.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig Rice): I will pick up on the hate crime piece that was mentioned. I was involved in the Coalition Against Hate Crime before I became a TD. When we were campaigning on the hate crime legislation, it was often said that getting the legislation enacted was just the first step and what we actually needed was an action plan to reduce hate crime through doing the work on education and prevention. It is really concerning that the State and the Department have just failed to do that. They seem to feel that, having passed half a Bill, they are now done and have no interest in the other part, which they dropped, or in doing the deeper follow-up work around that national action plan and the awareness campaign. It is really disappointing because there were some early commitments that there would be some follow-up work and that the legislation was the first part. Is the Irish Traveller Movement hearing any updates on any of that work?

Ms Jacinta Brack: No. We have not had any interaction. The Coalition Against Hate Crime is a 22-member body. We have not had any interaction from the Department regarding a dialogue on what an action plan would look like. We wrote to the Department and the Minister

very recently to see if that would be forthcoming but we have heard nothing so far. There is another part attached to that. As Deputy Rice will know, it is about people understanding how to go about taking action on a hate crime. That is not in there. An awareness campaign would be very important so that people would understand how to do that. That is a critical first step so that people would know how to exercise their rights.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig Rice): There absolutely needs to be that kind of education and awareness across the community. The last area I want to touch on is the movement's engagement with the Oireachtas more broadly. This is the second term in which there has been a dedicated committee. Has that resulted in any tangible differences or improvements? If not, how could it be used more effectively to achieve the kind of change we want to see? I have only been here a short time but every week we hear from representative organisations and groups about the scale of the challenges. I have no doubt the witnesses are incredibly frustrated. I am frustrated at the lack of action in that regard. How do we, as an Oireachtas and as a committee, achieve change and get things done? I do not know the answer and I would be interested to hear the witnesses' thoughts.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: We will both take this question. We will probably bring different narratives to it. If we become repetitive and continue to talk about the same issues, it unfortunately becomes an echo chamber. As somebody with lived experience, I am not just looking to bring forward issues. I am looking to bring forward opportunities, solutions, innovation and a way to move forward. When we talk about racism, we talk about solutions like the national action plan on racism. We talk about hate crime and hate speech. We put forward areas but it is really important that the committee does not overindulge in such a breadth of areas. It should have a narrow focus on implementation.

Ireland has good policies and key strategies, including the health action plan and the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy. The committee should really focus on the actions within those plans. How are they to be applied? Where is the implementation? Where are the resources? Who is leading out? How is it being led out? Where are the cost estimates Ms Brack mentioned with regard to cost-efficiency? Where are the resources for the sector to engage with and participate in local democracy? Where is that happening? If we are talking about general heritage, how is that playing out?

I know the committee has had some discussions but it is better to be really strategic and tactical in using the committee's time and resources. The committee does not necessarily have to bring every single key stakeholder in. It is really important and would allow the committee to be efficient, to have time and resources and to prepare. I am sure members' time is valuable. People have had to leave for particular reasons. The committee should have a clear focus. It is about oversight of the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy, implementation, supports and resources and how they are being applied. That will give the committee a really clear and tangible focus. I have mentioned that before. There may be gaps within that. All of the areas we are talking about are more or less covered within that. There are also specific areas relating specifically to accommodation. If the Deputy is talking about Traveller accommodation, it is about being specific. What area of accommodation are we talking about? That is very prevalent. I know we have not touched on that but to say that the committee wants a national accommodation authority would be a really clear focus on a specific area where change is needed.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig Rice): We could take the action plan, see where the actions are, bring in those responsible for their implementation and ask where those actions are and what budget is available.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: Absolutely.

Ms Jacinta Brack: I will add to that. As it happens, this is actually the third committee. The first vision for the committee was in 2016. It was formed in 2017 under the then chairperson, the former Senator, Colette Kelleher. There was a huge benefit to Travellers participating in the committee. It delivered on something else, the visibility and participation and participation of the community. We reckoned that fewer than five Travellers had ever been through the doors of Leinster House before that so the experience was hugely positive. Community members articulated their own issues. That was excellent. It was really good. The Government fell before the committee published its last report. There was an interim report. As the Deputy will know, the second committee focused on particular themes. It looked at the caravan loans scheme in particular.

I am in total agreement with Mr. Joyce on the implementation of NTRIS. I am not sure if that would overstep the terms of the reference of this committee but, in a way-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig Rice): I think we did include the-----

Ms Jacinta Brack: NTRIS is included. Ministerial oversight would probably strike a chord with us. Ministers should appear before this committee to report on their particular actions, if that is within the remit of the committee. If it aligned with the budgetary process next year, it would be very useful. It might be possible to unpack the plans of particular Ministers with regard to their commitments and actions under NTRIS. That might be a further useful exercise.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig Rice): Deciding on a central focus is a good suggestion. I am in politics to secure outcomes and to improve people's lives. We need to figure out how best to do that, with guidance from the community. I thank the witnesses very much for that suggestion.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: As far as I am aware, the Oireachtas committees are a mechanism to provide accountability. In addition to the Seanad and the Dáil, the Oireachtas committees can provide a really good opportunity for that. The issues are so prevalent that anybody can tell you very clearly what they are. What is really important is ensuring transparency and accountability. If we are asked about resources, we can tell the committee about the struggles we have.

However, it would be really useful to know what the estimates are, and the ways and mechanisms to ensure that voluntary and community organisations are resourced. What are the State and the Ministers doing to ensure there is an increase in investment, given the increase in the cost of living?

At the moment, everything has gone up. The sector would not advocate strongly for its entitlements because it is advocating for the community, so it is the community it is pushing for. If we look at the cost of living, there is no cost-of-living increase for those in the sector, but everything has gone up. There have been no increases in payments, even though rents, mortgages and prices have gone up. If we want to support the community and those in the sector, we have to resource that. Community development is about investing in people. It is

about creating a pathway for people to see a career and an opportunity to bring about change, and about wanting to do that. If they cannot afford to do that and are competing against the private sector and other sectors, with the best intent in the world, they may not be able to continue to provide that support.

Of course, we want our community to be in those positions, to be supported and to have investment. We also want people who are allies and supporters to feel valued and supported within that. That is very important. We cannot do this by ourselves. The duty bearers need to take some level of ownership and responsibility for that. As Ms Brack said, following any discussions with our members, there should be budgetary costings for NTRIS and clear costings and estimates related to specific areas. It is valid that senior officials and Ministers can be invited in at specific times, such as during the budget Estimates, and there are committees across the Oireachtas that have responsibility for that. However, how does that relate to Travellers, who are a small community and less than 1% of the population? Whatever costings are being sought, they are not significant. What we are looking for is a pittance compared to that.

I will give an example. We have the yellow flag of the diversity and inclusion programme. That programme does incredible work in schools in fostering support and inclusion, and on anti-racism. While I do not have the figures in front of me, approximately 53,000 young people have gone through the programme, as well as 3,500 teachers. It does not have biannual funding. It might surprise committee members, but we were not even aware whether the programme would be here in 2026. In November, we were scrambling to try to secure funding. We have now secured funding through the Department of education and other areas, which we welcome, but we will be back here again next year in the same position. That is the level at which we are trying to manage the programmes that we have.

Ms Brack mentioned the Dormant Accounts Fund. It is welcome and positive that it is investing in the sector. It is also investing in other communities, by the way, in case anyone thinks we are getting too much investment. We are not. There is investment across other areas. It is benefiting communities. It is about ensuring that those investments that are benefiting communities are sustained across Departments afterwards, and that there is a transition from the Dormant Accounts Fund to Departments in terms of continued funding. That is very important as we continue. The Traveller apprenticeship programme, TAP, is funded from the Dormant Accounts Fund. We would like to see that transferred over to the Department to continue the initiatives we are providing and supporting. They are playing a significant role in apprenticeships and in initiatives around anti-racism.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I hear what Mr. Joyce is saying with regard to the State and the different Departments. We need to have more permanent funding. Relying on the Dormant Accounts Fund is not going to be sufficient. We need to make them accountable. We will try to our best to tackle most of them.

In relation to getting volunteers in the Traveller community, I will give the example of the St. Margaret's site. We have lost all of the people there. At one stage, I could go to them and convene a meeting. I have noticed this has happened in a lot of places. That whole area has fallen down. There are different reasons for that, for example, it can be due to accommodation, things not being done, the conditions and so on. In saying that, I am talking to some of the residents of St. Margaret's at the moment. To pull everyone together for a plan is now nearly

impossible for me. Certainly, I am not going to be able to do it. I will go in and try to talk to them, but I am struggling. Years ago, I could go to Avila, St. Margaret's or St. Joseph's, and I always had people who could pull things together. That seems to have disappeared.

I do not know whether that is replicated in the rest of the country. It is a big worry. We can have all the funding, and I accept there is major progress in education and a lot of other areas. The apprenticeship programme, which is brilliant, was an example given by Mr. Joyce. However, I am a bit worried about the on-the-ground stuff that I am meeting. I have to say that.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: There is a challenge for people. When people are living in below-standard conditions and, on top of that, they have all these external factors, of course, there is a challenge for them to participate. The very basics of turning up and participating become a difficulty. The stresses that Deputy Ellis has might be more about his constituents, but the stresses a Traveller has might be the stresses of life, poverty and the services and supports that are not available to them. We know all those other issues are prevalent.

I know Ballymun very well, and I know the site the Deputy is referring to. If we look not just at the site but at the whole of Ballymun and other areas, there is a need to undertake an assessment of needs to identify the issues, what the community needs and wants, what type of supports are needed - again, it comes down to resources - and how we ensure the community is central to decisions that impact their lives. Once they are central to it, they will feel ownership of it, and they will want to participate. In doing that, it is about the development of accommodation, where they would see themselves and what supports need to be put in place.

I will give the example of the Louth Traveller Movement, who have great energy, momentum and engagement. Unfortunately, they do not have resources, but they are coming together. As part of that, it is about the community being supported, and they are. However, that may not continue from year to year, which is the point I was making.

The issue the Deputy is referring to is sometimes systemic in a location and also in other areas. There is a need to ensure supports are available nationally. I would remind people that there were specialised supports for the old community development programme, CDP. In this case, in Ballymun, there were no additional supports at that type of level. There is a need for that going forward. Travellers require other supports when organisations find themselves getting into difficulty. To be honest, none of us were aware of that organisation that was being dismantled at the time. We were not aware of it. We did not know of the resource issues or the challenges that were happening. If we had known, maybe we could have had some intervention and supports in place.

The question really is what is what is needed now. What is needed is engagement on the needs of the community going forward, including what resources they need, and what does that look like. We are not service delivery. We are not there to try to provide services for the State. We are there to ensure that the issues that impact people's lives are brought forward in a way that they can be heard. I know some of the staff. They are employed across other areas, which is really important. We are not losing people. The people are still there, but they may not be involved in the same organisation.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I have said enough on that. I will talk to Mr. Joyce after the meeting.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig Rice): I thank the witnesses for their time, engagement and ongoing work, everything they do and all the organisations they support. Is there anything else they would like to have said?

Ms Jacinta Brack: I will address a point Deputy Ellis made that we did not reply to, which was on the area of child poverty. It is something we feel very strongly about. We have tried to enhance our advocacy, as it were, in the past two years around poverty generally for Travellers, including across the budgetary process. The child poverty element is something that is not being tackled despite what is an action plan under the EU child guarantee and oversight of the Department of the Taoiseach. There is no ring-fenced attention to Traveller children, and that requires a particular set of actions. I wanted to come back to that in some way.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.52 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Thursday, 11 December 2025.