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, 15 Deireadh Fómhair 2026

Thursday, 15 October 2026

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:

John Connolly,	Malcolm Noonan,
Dessie Ellis,	Anne Rabbitte.
Tony McCormack,	
Séamus McGrath,	
Naoise Ó Muirí,	
Maurice Quinlivan,	
Barry Ward.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Thomas Gould.

Teachta / Deputy George Lawlor sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Tháinig an comhchoiste le chéile i seisiún príobháideach, cuireadh an suí ar fionraí ar 12.40 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís i seisiún poiblí ar 12.43 p.m.

Traveller Accommodation: Discussion (Resumed)

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome everybody to the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community. Apologies have been received from Deputy Rice.

This meeting is to discuss the current condition of the Traveller accommodation site on Spring Lane, Ballyvolane, Cork, and its proposed development. Our witnesses are, from Cork County Council, Mr. Brian Geaney, assistant chief executive, Ms Martina Broderick, acting director of services, housing directorate, and joining us remotely, Ms Colette Dennehy, administrative officer from the administration section; from Cork Traveller Women's Network, Ms Brigid Carmody, project co-ordinator; and from the Traveller Visibility Group Cork, Breda O'Donoghue, director of advocacy, and joining us remotely, Mr. John O'Sullivan, Traveller men's development worker. They are all very welcome.

I ask anyone attending remotely to mute their microphone when not contributing so that we do not pick up any background noise or feedback. As usual, I remind all those in attendance to ensure their mobile phones are on silent or switched off.

Members attending remotely are reminded of the constitutional requirement that in order to participate in public meetings, they must be physically present within the confines of the Leinster House complex.

As the witnesses are within the precincts of Leinster House, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentation they make to the committee. This means that they have an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything they say at the meeting. However, they are expected not to abuse this privilege 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 as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I invite Mr. Geaney to make his opening statement. He will be followed by Ms Carmody and then Ms O'Donoghue. We will then proceed with a question-and-answer session.

Mr. Brian Geaney: We submitted a detailed opening statement but given the time constraint of five minutes, I will go through the more salient points.

I thank the Chair and members of the committee for their invitation to attend the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community. Attending with me are Ms Martina Broderick, acting director of housing, and Ms Colette Dennehy, an administrative officer, who is attending remotely. We welcome this opportunity to meet the committee to discuss the current conditions of the Traveller accommodation site on Spring Lane, Ballyvolane, the proposed development and other related matters.

In summary, Cork City Council remains firmly dedicated to improving the lives of Cork's Traveller community, most of whom, it is important to remember, are school-going children. This is being achieved through the steady delivery of safe, suitable and appropriate accommodation, sustained engagement with families and close partnerships with advocacy groups and statutory agencies.

Progress is tangible. It includes the delivery and offer of standard housing, the advancement of Traveller-specific schemes at Spring Lane, Nash's Boreen and Ballycurreen, and implementation of the equality action plan. This includes investment in site improvements and community initiatives that celebrate Traveller culture, strengthen participation and support young people.

The type of Traveller housing in Cork city can range from standard local authority housing to Traveller-specific housing in a group setting or part of a cluster within a larger estate, which was identified following the assessment of need process completed prior to drafting the current Traveller accommodation programme.

Cork City Council has multiple Traveller-specific projects at the early stages of development across the city. These include 27 units at Spring Lane, eight units for Nash's Boreen and a further five units at Ballycurreen, which is a specific scheme to cater for Traveller families and accommodate housing for the senior Traveller community and those who need adapted housing due to medical need. Cork City Council also works extensively with Traveller families who opt for standard housing.

It should be noted that Cork City Council engaged extensively with the Ombudsman for Children's investigation into the conditions on the Spring Lane site and all recommendations made by the Ombudsman for Children's office were addressed. These are kept under review on a continuous basis by the council.

Cork City Council has a dedicated Traveller accommodation unit, TAU, responsible for Traveller accommodation issues. It comprises seven full-time and one part-time staff. There are three designated Traveller liaison officers working full time with the team, whose primary role is to engage with the Traveller community regarding their current and future accommodation needs and the implementation of the equality action plan for Traveller accommodation. The TAU also has a dedicated technical staff member who works to address the maintenance requirements across all Traveller sites. This includes mobile home maintenance and overall site maintenance.

Cork City Council, including the customer service unit and Traveller accommodation unit, engages extensively with the Traveller community. I will provide some statistics on engagement, telephone calls and appointments between the Traveller accommodation unit and the Traveller community. In 2025, there were 1,755 engagements, of which 490 were in Spring Lane and in 2026, there were 2,523 engagements, of which 702 were directly related to Spring Lane. In terms of meetings and appointments, in 2025, there were 202 engagements with the Traveller community, of which 41 were in Spring Lane.

In 2026, there have been 144 meetings or appointments with the Traveller community, 33 of which have related to Spring Lane.

Cork City Council has prepared an equality action plan on Traveller accommodation and has commenced implementation of this plan. A working group has been established, which consists of stakeholders from the Cork City Council Traveller accommodation unit, the corporate and culture and community directorate, representation from the Cork Travellers Women's Network, the Traveller Visibility Group and UCC representation, which has a particular focus on the rights of children. This group has held a first initial meeting and work on implementing the recommendations in this plan is under way.

In respect of the Spring Lane development, Cork City Council is pleased to advise that a tender invitation has issued for the Spring Lane Ellis Yard development, which will deliver 27 Traveller-specific housing units. The tender invitations issued on 8 October 2026 and the closing date for submissions is 8 December of the current year. Cork City Council will be engaging with all residents on this site to keep them updated as the project progresses. A third site to accommodate the remaining families on Spring Lane is also progressing through a separate procurement process. This site will accommodate a further 15 families.

In addition, Cork City Council continues to engage with families who are seeking standard housing and those who wish to avail of standard housing pending delivery of their permanent Traveller-specific accommodation. Cork City Council has made several offers of temporary housing to families who wish to be accommodated elsewhere pending delivery of their Traveller-specific accommodation. Cork City Council secured funding of €557,000 from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage for the upgrade to the electrical services on Spring Lane. This funding is for the civil works required for the installation of ducting and mini pillars at various locations throughout the Spring Lane site. The purpose of this project is to improve electrical safety on the site and minimise the sharing of electrical points on the site. This project commenced in August 2024 and is only partially completed as this contractor has been stood down on a number of occasions due to contractors being stopped or asked by residents to leave the site. This has resulted in additional costs to deliver the project as well as unnecessary delays in the delivery of the project. Progress was being made in recommencing this project until recently, when a serious incident occurred at Spring Lane, which was reported generally in the media. Following this incident, the contractor has officially withdrawn from the project. Cork City Council intends to recommence this project in the coming months once a new contractor has been identified and on-site issues have been resolved. We have made progress in the past nine or ten days on selecting a new contractor. Cork City Council secured funding of €518,278 from the Department for the provision of ten welfare units and associated works on Spring Lane to improve welfare facilities to the periphery of the site. Delivery of this project is dependent on the completion of the electrical upgrade. The electrical upgrade is on hold, as I have outlined, and these units cannot be installed until the electrical upgrade is completed. The units are ready and available for delivery once the electrical works are completed.

Cork City Council has been operating the national caravan loan scheme since 2002. During this period, the council has issued 42 caravan loans on all our Traveller sites. Of this overall number, nine mobile homes have been provided to Spring Lane since the scheme commenced. Cork City Council continues to carry out essential maintenance works on the site. Since 2024, Cork City Council has a record 196 resolved cases for essential repairs. In addition, ongoing improvement works are being undertaken as required.

In conclusion, while challenges remain, Cork City Council's dedicated Traveller accommodation unit continues to work with families to meet immediate needs and is delivering lasting improvements in housing, safety, inclusion and opportunity.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Mr. Geaney. I now invite Ms Carmody to make her opening statement.

Ms Brigid Carmody: I thank the committee for the opportunity to talk about the Spring Lane halting site in Cork. I am the co-ordinator of the Cork Traveller Women's Network. We are a community development organisation run by Traveller women in Cork city. I have worked with families on Spring Lane to secure accommodation, as have Ms O'Donoghue and Mr. O'Sullivan, for over 15 years. I have sat on the Cork city local Traveller accommodation consultative committee, LTACC, for many years. Like Ms O'Donoghue, we have had many Traveller accommodation plans come and go with very few outcomes for the families on Spring Lane. We welcome the fact that the tendering process has now gone out for Ellis Yard. We were always told that this was dependent on the third site, so it is great that it went out on 8 October.

I believe that a picture tells a thousand words so, for my opening statement, I have prepared some photographs. I visited the Spring Lane site on Monday with the chair of the LTCC Oliver Moore and we met with approximately 50 families. The photographs I will show to the committee are ones we took with the permission of the families. I have also included some questions they have asked. The first photograph the committee will see shows the Spring Lane halting site in 2017. Next to that, members will see a photograph of Spring Lane halting site taken on Monday of this week. There has been very little change to the site in those nine years. In 2021, the Ombudsman for Children identified extreme overcrowding, inadequate facilities and unsafe living conditions for children and families.

Very little has changed for families on the site since the Ombudsman for Children made those remarks. This presentation shows photographs taken on Monday and highlights residents' concerns. There are potholes throughout the site, and I am not doing them justice by calling them potholes. Chunks of ground are missing all over the site. This is where children are playing. There is no safe area for children to play in. This is where they play. There is gravel, broken surfaces and sewage in the official and unofficial bays. The cliff face is going to collapse in bad weather. The official bays have very bad resurfacing and children are falling. This is what they are stepping out to when they come out of their caravans every day.

The next photograph shows the new walkway to the school. While this walkway has been built, families want to know who is maintaining it. Nobody has come to view, check or clean it. Is it up to the families to do that? They are a bit unsure about that. The next one shows a welfare hut on an official bay for a toilet and a washing machine. Members will see there is wiring. They are in such bad condition. There are steel doors. This is one of the official bays and it is in really bad condition. The next photograph members will see shows other welfare units on site. As Mr. Geaney mentioned in his statement, there are ten welfare units in storage and I think they have been in storage for about three years at a cost to the TAU. Those ten welfare units will not cover every family on site. There are only ten that should be delivered but they are in storage and are being paid for by the TAU until works are completed. Regarding plumbing, this is another welfare unit where adults and children are going in and out of. They are using it for a washing post.

The next picture shows a lot of exposed pipes around the site. Again, this is an official bay on the site where pipes are exposed. You can imagine children running in and out through them. All the bays are overcrowded. The next photograph shows bad gravel on the site. As I said, there are approximately 50 families on site. Some of the bays have six or seven caravans and some have two.

The next one shows one of the electrical upgrades on the site. There are six caravans connected to this. That is not safe.

The next photo is to draw members' attention to the fact that on 17 September a blaze destroyed three caravans on Spring Lane. Thankfully, nobody was hurt. It was only the caravans that were damaged but we could have been looking at another Carrickmines. The site is a fire risk and is overcrowded. This clearly shows the damage that could be done.

The questions the families asked included the following. Where is the action for the long-term plan of the site, that is, the redevelopment of Spring Lane into a modern, safe, culturally appropriate site? As to the creation of new homes in Ellis's Yard, again there is no clear start date. When will the third site be developed?

Families are heading into another winter in these conditions. They have heard promises of better conditions being made and broken again and again. From talking to some of the families, I can say that they are exhausted and sick of it. They have another winter coming. It is causing frustration and aggravation. There is a complete lack of trust. When the Ombudsman for Children's report was done, I remember going to Spring Lane and saying to families that this was it and that this was the one chance they would have to get better accommodation. They said to me that would never happen and that they had been promised it before and would be promised it again. They are scraping and grovelling for something.

Ms Breda O'Donoghue: I thank the joint committee for inviting me and my colleague from TVG, John O'Sullivan, and also our sister organisation in Cork. Our statement will look at the condition of the Spring Lane halting site in Ballyvolane and the proposed plan to redevelop the site, creating two new group housing accommodation offerings, in Ellis's Yard and on a third site.

I would like it noted that it is very difficult to compile more than 30 years of advocacy and activism surrounding the conditions in Spring Lane into a five-minute presentation, but I will do my best. I am sure Ms Carmody's pictures speak a thousand words.

On a personal note, for context and for historical reasons, I lived on Spring Lane from September 1989 to 1994. Mine were one of the first families in there. I was 17 years old, by the way. I was eight and a half months pregnant when I had to leave Spring Lane because of the severe overcrowding. The appalling conditions at that stage, only five years after the site had opened, were because of that severe overcrowding. After much local campaigning, Cork City Council in 1999 committed to a proposal to redevelop the site, but all progress on the redevelopment was cancelled and there has been minimal development on the site since. In 2026, the overcrowding is worse, and the facilities and bays are much worse, than when I left in 1994.

TVG has sent in submissions for each new Traveller accommodation programme every five years and has never seen any of our recommendations adopted or acknowledged, so much so

that in the last programme TVG's proposal was a carbon copy of our previous proposal five years before and nobody noticed. While we welcomed the replacement of the two additional halting sites, it meant the same families moved out of the old site into the new site. That has been the only addition in Cork city in the past 36 years. While we welcomed that, we are very aware the first site is now Mahon Point Shopping Centre and the second site is now Apple's car park. Cork city has seen no additional Traveller accommodation delivered in over 36 years. I often wondered where Travellers in the city were in those 36 years because they certainly were not accommodated in additional Traveller-specific accommodation. Given the population growth in the Traveller community in the intervening years, this is a major concern for TVG and all Travellers across the city. It quickly comes back to the aim set out in the 1963 commission to assimilate Travellers into the settled community and take away Traveller identity. That is eradicating or criminalising Travellers' ethnic way of life - specifically, collective or communal living in the wider family unit and nomadism.

After the Ombudsman for Children's damning report on the conditions in Spring Lane in 2019 and the ensuing list of recommendations directed to Cork City Council, some movement took place around emergency repairs and temporary stopgaps. The city council contracted mediators to complete an independent needs analysis of families on site to inform development plans for new and refurbished accommodation to alleviate the overcrowding and improve living conditions for council tenants. As of 2026, about five families had been rehoused as a result of this mediation project, as their preference was for standard housing. However, we know that more families and individuals have moved onto the site, and some of the children involved in the original ombudsman's complaint are now adults with young families living on the site. That has increased the severe overcrowding on Spring Lane. This means the original plans for the redevelopment and rehousing of Spring Lane residents will need to be revised to reflect these changes.

TVG is aware that Cork City Council has reported conflict on site that has led to contractors not being able to work on the site or to complete some of the planned works, including a much-needed electricity upgrade and the installation of some new welfare pods. So far there has been no resolution to these issues and the work on Spring Lane has reached a standstill, with no clear management or plan communicated by Cork City Council. TVG has stressed the need for a community liaison officer to be contracted to act as a conduit between residents, contractors coming onto the site and city council staff. We have also requested that further security be provided for engineers and contractors if safety is a concern. Given the complexity of a large live site, further work constructing meaningful working relationships between residents, family leaders and Cork City Council project managers is needed so that disputes or conflicts are resolved swiftly and safely. None of these recommendations have been actioned.

TVG has advocated for the building of 12 new bays in Ellis's Yard to be started first to alleviate overcrowding. We have consistently been told no work can start on Ellis's Yard or Spring Lane until the third site is delivered and ready for tenants. The third site is still unidentified, with no clear idea when it will be available. I am aware that, as of this week, it has gone out to tender. As a result of ongoing pressure and public outcry since the recent interfamily conflict on Spring Lane, we have been told Ellis's Yard will be developed, with the contractor work going out to tender, as I said. We have been calling for this since 2024 as Ellis's Yard was a vacant site ready for building work to begin and would have rehoused at least

12 families from Spring Lane, immediately easing overcrowding. We still do not understand why this was not considered.

Alongside this, bad weather and unresolved road-surfacing and drainage issues have led to flooding and further damage to trailers and facilities on site. When TVG has advocated for repair works to be completed, such as resurfacing a road, we have been told no such repair work on Spring Lane will be authorised as it is scheduled to be redeveloped. Seven years on from the ombudsman's report, families are still living in these appalling conditions. Seven years on and there is no end in sight to the appalling conditions and overcrowded environment for the families on Spring Lane.

An Cathaoirleach: Thank you, folks, for your opening statements. We now move to a question-and-answer session. First up is Senator Noonan.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. I thank our witnesses for their statements.

The members have also received correspondence from the chair of the LTACC and my colleague Councillor Oliver Moran, who has described what he witnessed on the site visit with Ms Carmody on Monday of this week, and it is pretty damning, to say the least. Councillor Moran and I have been in correspondence on this for some time. Ms Carmody, Ms O'Donoghue and I met under happier circumstances in Cork celebrating Traveller culture a number of years ago in my previous role, and it is great to have them here as well as the officials from Cork City Council.

My first question is to Cork City Council. Is there still an inherent policy of assimilation of Traveller families into standard housing? That is probably unwritten but it seems to be still the case. What we have heard in the committee over recent years has been this type of approach whereby there is an attempt to move away from these group housing schemes around the country. Is that an inherent policy that perhaps is a diktat from the Department or is it something that seems to be an ongoing issue that sites like Spring Lane are being allowed to run down in such a manner?

Mr. Brian Geaney: No, it is not the policy. Members of the Travelling community are met. Some who want to go into standard hosing are accommodated, but our Traveller accommodation plan has plans in place for a number of sites across the city. We are here today to talk about Spring Lane, but there are frustrations with moving those projects on as well. From the city council's perspective, members need to accept that we have contractors who go into Spring Lane but are being stopped from carrying out these works. The council is trying to help the local community by carrying out a number of projects there, such as electrical upgrade projects so we can get in the welfare units. The council is not stopping the contractors from doing that; some members of the local community are doing that. Funding has been made available from the Department, but we are precluded from spending that funding because of those efforts. This is a community where the emergency response unit, ERU, has had to go in on numerous occasions to try to help us move on works. That is the reality of the situation and what is happening on the ground.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I appreciate that but Mr. Geaney can also appreciate, I am sure, that the inter-family conflicts are a result of the overcrowding over decades of neglect in Spring Lane. I go back to the broader point that was made in Ms Carmody's opening statement. Is it

not preferable to take an overall master plan approach that would include a community centre and facilities for horses and innovation? We have asked this question of other local authorities about taking a much more innovative, inclusive and participative approach to working with the families. I absolutely appreciate the immediate challenges that are there. We saw the electrical points in the photograph. The last thing we want is another Carrickmines on our hands. The broader question is about taking a bigger picture approach and planning for the future as Traveller families grow and their demands have to be met within the community.

Mr. Brian Geaney: There is an assessment of need carried out in terms of the future Traveller accommodation required. That approach was taken in St. Anthony's Park, where a community centre was provided as part of the group housing scheme. Unfortunately, however, we could show pictures today as to what that community centre is now, at substantial cost to the taxpayer. Unfortunately, it did not work. Ms O'Donoghue has spoken about seven years. The report by the Office of the Children's Ombudsman, published in 2024, said that a number of the recommendations had been acted on. I quote directly from it:

> Our review of the progress made on the recommendations contained in the *No End in Site* investigation is very encouraging. In this regard, the Ombudsman for Children is satisfied that sufficient and significant progress has been made by the Local Authority on each of the recommendations arising from the investigation.
>
> We commend the Local Authority, the advocacy groups and the families and children concerned for their considerable efforts to engage with each other and with the long-standing problems at the site.

At that stage we brought in a mediation company to meet with all the families and to facilitate all that in terms of the plans that were then put in place for the redevelopment of Ellis's Yard and Spring Lane itself, as well as the third site, which is going through a separate procurement process and which was impacted by the new northern distributor road. Those issues have almost reached a conclusion and we expect to go for a Part 8 for that site before the end of the year.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I appreciate the frustration from the local authority's perspective, but the families here are living in such appalling conditions. There is bigger picture stuff needed. I note in Mr. Geaney's statement the comments about trying to develop some community development projects, but it requires a much longer term view, in my view, and looking at other projects around the country.

Perhaps I will put this question to Ms Carmody and Ms O'Donoghue. There is no direct liaison person on site in Spring Lane, as I understand it, so the communication channel can be challenging. I appreciate the number of meetings that the local authority has stated have occurred. From Ms Carmody and Ms O'Donoghue's perspective, though, is there something missing in terms of longer term supports and wraparound supports for families, not only in terms of primary healthcare but also in terms of community development and a focal point for the community, which, over time, would help develop the site and give families a sense of pride as the projects develop on the site?

Ms Brigid Carmody: That is something both I and TVG have recommended - a liaison officer to work with the families - because we all know that the young adults on Spring Lane have never lived in a house. They have never lived in any development. They know nothing

but Spring Lane, and it is a big move for them to move into a new house or a new site. There will need to be some sort of wraparound service available.

The community centre that Mr. Geaney mentioned in St. Anthony's Park was demolished but, through consultation, the families did not really want the community centre in St. Anthony's Park. We have a very successful one in another group housing scheme in Meelagh. It runs homework clubs and we have workers down there. It is not that it is not wanting; it is that you need to consult with the families and ask them what they want in the community centre, rather than just planting a community centre and assuming that because it worked in Mahon, it will work in St. Anthony's Park. There was no management of the community centre in St. Anthony's Park.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Does that then involve a much more immersive and participative approach to the development of the Traveller accommodation programmes? Ms O'Donoghue said in her statement that you could cut and paste the submission every time and she feels it is ignored. Perhaps from the point of view of all parties coming together to try to develop a much more inclusive and participative approach that would start addressing these shorter term issues, of which there are a really significant number, it is a matter of looking at the longer term and a bigger picture of a vision for Spring Lane that is inclusive. It is just shocking to see that children have to walk to school in those conditions or that they have to engage with their peers or go to birthday parties without being able to share that with their friends in school and still come back to what I can only describe as squalor because it is just appalling.

Ms Brigid Carmody: As I mentioned, we were there on Monday. People were playing on the boulders. The children have nowhere to play. They jump from boulder to boulder.

Ms Breda O'Donoghue: In relation to the very clear evidence that everybody can display here today, there has been no addition to Traveller accommodation in 36 years. That tells the story of everything, as far as I am concerned.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: It does, yes.

Ms Breda O'Donoghue: We have hundreds of Travellers across Cork city in the exact same situation as those in Spring Lane. They may not be on an official local authority site but they are living in the same situation. That is nothing new. This is a historical problem. This was a problem on the day the site opened in 1989. I have been witness to that. It is the same with the site with the community centre Mr. Geaney just spoke about.

That site was overcrowded on the day it opened. We talked to the local authority, worked in consultation with it and told it what was going to happen. As it was overcrowded on the day and nothing was being provided, Traveller families moved into any empty space on the site because they had nowhere else to go. Before we discuss the nitty-gritty, problem-solving parts that will work, we have to look at why, in 36 years, no addition to Traveller accommodation was provided in Cork city.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I have to leave. I might suggest that at some point, if we can, we visit Spring Lane. I know the previous committee visited the site but I urge-----

An Cathaoirleach: The pictures displayed here say a thousand words. It is certainly something we can do, if the committee wishes.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I thank the witnesses.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank Mr. Geaney, Ms Carmody and Ms O'Donoghue for their input. I visited the Spring Lane site nearly four years ago and saw the conditions. We made complaints and met with Cork City Council's officials and all the senior people. We outlined the conditions we had seen in regard to the electricity, roads and paths, and the condition of the portaloos, or whatever you want to call them. The witnesses called them welfare huts. I find that a strange one. We would normally call them outdoor facilities but, anyhow, I saw the conditions and they were absolutely appalling. Looking at the pictures we have here now, there has not been any major improvement. I find the way the council is coming across baffling. It is being hindered by issues at the site, with people objecting or causing problems for people coming in, like contractors. The reality is there has been damn all built in Cork for years. That has led to people going on housing lists and getting the housing assistance payment, HAP. That has disintegrated the community in many ways because there are no facilities provided.

I am curious as to why this is. We are talking about this new site and the new homes on Ellis's Yard. Surely those could have been delivered with a proper security plan in place because then you could tackle an awful lot. If certain people could be moved out, you could start tackling the problem. I do not understand why getting those works going and accommodating some of the families have not been a major priority. Other problems could then be tackled. We talked about the electricity issue. I saw the electricity supply and it was absolutely terrible. There were places with wires everywhere, running off little sockets and stuff like that. It was dangerous and that has to be dealt with. That was nearly five years ago and it still has not changed. That does not make sense; it is not right.

Mr. Geaney mentioned the Ombudsman for Children's report, which states that Cork City Council had engaged extensively with the Ombudsman for Children's investigation into the conditions on the Spring Lane site and all recommendations by the office had been addressed and closed out by the council. Can Mr. Geaney explain that to me? I am going back nearly to the same time, which was four or five years. Can Mr. Geaney explain to me how those recommendations could have been closed out, which means, to me, that they were dealt with, when obviously they were not. I am curious about that and I ask Mr. Geaney to explain it.

On the issue of overcrowding, in regard to what has been provided there, I assume the caravan loan scheme is in operation and people can avail of it. The conditions may be bad but there is nothing to stop people from upgrading their places. If they are not being upgraded, there has to be a reason and we have to hear what the problem is. Cork City Council cannot keep saying it is a security issue. That does not enter into something like this. Is the caravan scheme operating and is it working? At the time we were at the site, we were told by the council that the facilities and machines for washing would be upgraded and that would be fast-forwarded. That does not seem to have happened. It might have happened in one or two places but it has not been satisfactorily dealt with.

While we have heard a lot from Cork City Council, very little, if anything, has actually been done. It has been just a few pieces here and there. It really is not good enough and we need to have answers as to why. The money is there, from what we are told. It is not being spent. Stuff is sitting there and families are crowded. Their kids are living in terrible conditions, along with other family members. Why has that, more or less, come to a standstill?

How many people on the Spring Lane site now have to be accommodated? I think the witnesses said there are 50 or so people on the site. How many people on the site have to be accommodated and how many of them will be moved? What is the overall figure? We have to start providing accommodation. We cannot be just pushing people into availing of HAP or going onto the housing list. That is wrong. There has to be a better way of doing things.

Mr. Brian Geaney: I will explain the third site. What was decided at that stage was that it would be a total solution, in that everything would start together. In other words, you would develop Ellis's Yard and the third site, and then you would do Spring Lane finally. Unfortunately, the impact of the northern distributor road on that third site, which is now resolved, hindered that plan moving forward.

In respect of the report by the Ombudsman for Children, I am just quoting the ten recommendations directly. It states that the OCO is "satisfied that sufficient and significant progress has been made by the Local Authority on each of the recommendations arising from the investigation". We can make those recommendations available to the committee. They were very specific in respect of the school walkway and rehousing some of the families there. That investigation lasted a couple of years. I do not want to give the impression today that because the Office of the Ombudsman for Children said everything was okay, we have stopped trying to make progress.

It is easy for people here today to criticise the council for not making progress but we have had numerous contractors who refused to go on site due to intimidation and concerns for the health and safety of their own staff. I am giving the factual position. People cannot turn around here and say that is all the council's fault. We want to spend the money that has been allocated to do this but whether it is pest control, routine maintenance or servicing the portaloos, I have a litany of incidents where people have been stopped and intimidated, and those workers are not going back on the site.

Ms Carmody and Ms O'Donoghue mentioned welfare units being in storage because we cannot go in and perform the electrical upgrade. A contractor who went back numerous times just told us, "I am not going back", so we have to go away now and get a new contractor. There are serious law and order issues here. The images we saw earlier showed the mobile home that was burned. That is subject to a Garda investigation. We need to get the factual position here today in terms of the council being hindered in carrying out its work.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I understand what Mr. Geaney is saying. According to him, virtually all works are at a standstill due to intimidation or something similar. Has anyone been charged? Have these people been identified?

It is impossible. The witnesses are saying there are numerous incidents. How many people have been charged? How many people have been brought to task over this? A whole community cannot be held to ransom because of a couple of people. That does not make any sense. If it is the case, what is the problem in providing some sort of security for the contractors? What is the problem? I know it might be an extra cost but from a from a safety point of view, it makes more sense. I am puzzled because I have not seen anything in all the pictures I have seen. It is no different from what I have seen. It is probably even worse, in some ways, but there is no progress. The council officials must be able to sit down and say,

"My God, we have not moved an inch in years". It just does not add up. We have to be able to make progress.

Mr. Brian Geaney: What I would say is that we have now been successful in getting a new electrical contractor. These would be issues beyond a standard security company. We are working with the Garda in trying to get those works back up and running. In terms of people being charged or whatever, we would not, obviously, be privy to that information but complaints have been made to the Garda about some of the incidents that happened and occurred at Spring Lane.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I do not know whether anyone has been convicted. I find it a bit hard to blame everything on security because at the end of the day the job is for Cork City Council to maintain the site and do so to the highest standard. If there is an issue there where people are intimidating others then that has to be addressed. The council has to find a way to deal with it. Has anyone been charged for it? I do not know, but it is never going to stop if it is the case that nobody gets charged and nobody is dealt with. It seems to me that everything is spinning around that and people are left in these conditions. That is totally wrong. It cannot be right.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank everyone for being with us today. I thank the two people who are joining online as well. I know Mr. Geaney. He helped out before with Rainbow Club Cork and we had a good working relationship. It is important to say that before I start. I feel for Mr. Geaney sitting in that position, to be quite honest, and I appreciate his honesty in trying to answer these questions, but photographs still do not lie. The visual of this is dreadful. There is no doubt; it is dreadful. I hear everything Mr. Geaney is saying about losing a contractor and trying to go out to tender again to get another contractor and everything else like that. I hear where he is coming from.

At the same time, if I were a mother living in one of those caravans trying to encourage my children to participate in education - I am just saying education as one example - they would have to go and sit in a classroom when they do not have access to proper welfare units. I see the way the washing machines are laid out and everything else. What we are looking at there is not first world. Even the walkway is not appealing, to be quite honest with Mr. Geaney. I see the concrete on it and stuff like that. I am trying to work this out because I know the council has good people and good workers, who have to be well-intended because they would not want it for their own. None of the officials would want it for their own. Where is it falling down? Can Ms O'Donoghue help me here? I am from Galway, so I have not got a clue, but I am really trying to work out where it is falling down. I would love to hear-----

Ms Breda O'Donoghue: Can I just come in there very quickly? I will keep it as brief as possible. I know Mr. Geaney and Ms Broderick. I do not think any one person wants this to happen in any area. This is not a new problem. It is old. It was there long before Mr. Geaney or Ms Broderick took up office. What I am saying very clearly is that this is historical and there is no other word for it than "racism". I am sorry; I need to call it out. We are very dependent on local councillors approving something that goes out to tender that is going to house us or give us a home for the rest of our lives. We do not have that luxury because every time in the past that it has gone out, it never happens. We are dependent on local councillors. As one local councillor told me in person, a local councillor voting for a Traveller development in his or her area is like a turkey voting for Christmas. That is what is wrong. That is why

Spring Lane is in the state it is in. That is why we have had no addition to Traveller accommodation in Cork since 1990.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: All right. Now we have got to the nub of it.

Ms Breda O'Donoghue: That is the bottom line.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: As I said, I am from Galway, but can Mr. Geaney-----

Mr. Brian Geaney: We want to work, obviously, with the groups and we do, in fairness. Ms Dennehy and Ms Broderick work with the local Traveller accommodation consultative committee, LTACC, and with Ms Carmody and Ms O'Donoghue. I am trying to remember the vote. We have 31 councillors in Cork City Council. I think there were four councillors who voted against Spring Lane-----

Ms Breda O'Donoghue: What about the complaints?

Mr. Brian Geaney: ----- and Ellis's Yard. In fairness, it is the statutory function of the council. A Part 8 chief executive's report was put before the council but to be fair, they voted substantially for the development in Spring Lane and Ellis's Yard. I think it is unfair to blame our own council because they approved the Traveller accommodation plan.

Ms Breda O'Donoghue: I am not blaming them. Sorry.

Mr. Brian Geaney: There might be individual councillors who make comments or whatever, so it would be remiss of me not to call out the racism issue. I do not believe that our own councillors are in any way racist and they have supported the development in Spring Lane and Ellis's Yard. Where I would absolutely agree with Ms O'Donoghue is that this is a historical issue in Spring Lane. Obviously, there is substantial overcrowding of the site that has happened for numerous years. We were always going to get to a day where there was serious overcrowding on the site. Historical management arrangements or whatever were not good and the site was left to expand over time.

All I would ask today, whether it is the TVG or Cork Traveller Women's Network, is for them to help us get contractors to carry out the works and use the good relationships they have on the site because everyone wants to do this. I have met contractors who are totally frustrated. The principals in those organisations have employees leaving their organisation rather than working on sites. All those issues are on record. We do not want to give the impression today of helplessness either. I think we will now be able to get a contractor to go back and carry out the electrical upgrade because that is really important-----

Senator Anne Rabbitte: That is awfully important to us.

Mr. Brian Geaney: -----and that the welfare units go back in on the site and that is done, and then pending the medium-term plan in terms of carrying out the development going forward.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Ms Carmody wants to come in.

Ms Brigid Carmody: I want to say in response to Mr. Geaney that both the TVG and Cork Traveller Women's Network have always worked with Cork City Council. I am not sure that we can solve anything just because we are the Traveller organisation. I ask Mr. Geaney what Cork City Council would do if this were happening on any other housing estate. I think the

Garda would be called and people would be prosecuted for it. Both Ms O'Donoghue and I have always said that. If somebody is blocking work, they should be prosecuted for it.

From the families' perspective, they have lost all faith, trust and hope on that site that anything is going to happen. When something is being delivered, people are scrambling and fighting to get crumbs. It is causing frustration. For instance, there are families on that site. Mr. Geaney brought up the ten welfare huts. That is not going to accommodate every family. Some families do not get any. It is a selected ten who will get the welfare units. This is causing conflict within the site. Why should one of my neighbour's children get one and my child cannot have a toilet?

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Can Ms Carmody explain that? There are people watching this today who do not walk in her shoes and, at the same time, are probably very interested and would like to understand. What is a welfare hut? I am asking for-----

Ms Brigid Carmody: A welfare unit is a purpose-built unit with a toilet and shower, and it would be used for washing machines and dryers. It is a square unit with running water and electricity.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: All right. I am getting the picture here now.

Ms Brigid Carmody: It is a square unit with a washing machine, dryer, toilet and washing facilities.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Is Ms Carmody saying that not every family has a welfare hut within their compound space?

Ms Brigid Carmody: No. They are sharing them.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: If we are to take the positive out of today, I would love to think that we could work with whoever the electrical contractor is to get the basics done. There are basic human rights issues of access to water and children being able to wash. I am hearing Mr. Geaney saying that he has gone out to tender to get the contractors there to do it. I will ask Mr. Geaney for another commitment. Every family should have that basic right of a hut per family unit, whatever it makes up.

Ms Brigid Carmody: And for the electrical upgrade.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: From a safeguarding point of view.

Ms Brigid Carmody: Not every family is included in the electrical upgrade, so not every family is going to get electric from that electrical upgrading work. They do not get electricity and they do not get a welfare unit. This is why it is causing conflict on the site.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Is this a resource issue that central government is not supporting the council?

Mr. Brian Geaney: No, absolutely not. In fairness, there has been very good support. Ms Dennehy would more detailed knowledge of the site in terms of the ten welfare huts-----

Senator Anne Rabbitte: My apologies, Chair. I have gone over time.

(Interruptions)

Mr. Brian Geaney: We will come back to the Senator with the details. Space is probably one of the issues. From our perspective, if there are to be more welfare units, I do not see a problem. My point would be to get the ten in, get the electrical upgrade, and let us look at what other welfare units can be provided for those additional families.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Thinking about it from a family's point of view, it may be causing or adding to the frustration, or "If we are not all getting it, it ain't coming in." If that is part of the mentality of it I think the groups are well able to work it out themselves, if it is an issue of space.

Ms Breda O'Donoghue: I think the TAU is comprised of three people.

Ms Martina Broderick: No, there are about six.

Ms Breda O'Donoghue: Okay, I have only ever met three people from the TAU. I know John O'Sullivan is here today, but I do not think he can get in. I know he was going to talk about the committee that was set up to address Traveller accommodation in Cork. That committee meets for approximately one hour, or sometimes for an hour and a half, every second month. That is under ten hours a year given to discuss Traveller accommodation in that committee. At least half of that is about local councillors complaining about what is happening on their side of the city where there is a site. That is the make-up of the local Traveller accommodation consultative committee at the best of times. I have sat on that committee for a number of years, and I know this is fact.

Here is the real sting in the tale. The TAU does not just deal with the families in Spring Lane. It deals with every Traveller family in Cork. It is not that the TAU is just readily available at all times to deal with the families in Spring Lane, which is where we come in. We are community development projects, but we are not doing community development work because we are firefighting for Traveller families, advocating to have maintenance works carried out or to help them from the back of the van into the hub. How does that happen? We help them with this. Ms Carmody helps them with this. This is the work we are left to do. We cannot do the community work we are supposed to be doing because we are firefighting all of these issues. If everybody is doing what they are supposed to be doing, why then is Spring Lane in the condition it is 36 years later? Why is there severe overcrowding across the city, county and country? Why are Travellers overly represented in the homeless statistics? If each local authority were doing what it was supposed to be doing, we would not be having those issues.

We can sit here all day and say that if we ask the local authority to do something it will get better, but it will not. The truth of the matter is that if everybody on that site does not get the same thing, nobody is getting anything. That is how it has been for some time in relation to the local authority. We are looking for the push forward but we do not seem to be getting it and I am quite frustrated. I would imagine the Cork Traveller Women's Network is the same. We have nowhere else to go. Mr. Geaney said a few minutes ago that we have hit a brick wall. There is no place else to go with this. Ms Carmody and I were delighted when we got an invitation to sit here today. It gives us an opportunity to tell somebody else what is going on. We were part of the OCO report. We are the organisations that contacted the Ombudsman for Children. We organised the focus groups with the children for the Ombudsman. We were the people who worked with the mediators that Cork City Council brought in to work with the

families. This is not our first rodeo doing all of this. We have done it for the past ten, 15, 20 and 25 years. I do not know how much is left for any of us to give at this stage, and still we are talking about it going out to tender for the third site this week. Is that correct Mr. Geaney?

Mr. Brian Geaney: Last week for Ellis's Yard.

Ms Breda O'Donoghue: As Mr. Geaney mentioned, this was agreed and adopted by the local councillors a couple of years ago now and still has not happened, so I am worried about that. I am really frustrated and very angry about it. I do not want to be venting it here today because, as I said, it is not the fault of anyone here. It is no one's fault anywhere. It is a historical reason and somebody has got to help us and start asking the questions as to why.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I saw the photos in the presentation. I think Mr. Geaney would agree that this is unacceptable. No local authority could accept those. Mr. Geaney is saying that it is not an issue of resourcing as resources have been provided by central government to do something. It seems to be that when the local authority tries to do something using a contractor it is prevented from doing so. It is intimidation is really what Mr. Geaney is saying. Is it rudimentary maintenance the local authority is trying to get done on the site or is it the overall proposal in relation to Spring Lane? Is it relatively minor stuff or is it the fundamental upgrade project that the intimidation is preventing from going ahead?

Mr. Brian Geaney: It would be both routine maintenance and there would be specific upgrade projects, such as the electrical upgrade. We retain external contractors to carry out routine maintenance and electrical upgrades. It is both. It would also be servicing of Portaloos on the site. There is also a pest control service and a skip service, so this would be across the board. There is a litany of complaints.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It is both maintenance and progressing the works on the site. I know the witnesses are members of Traveller organisations and do not represent the site but they do very good work in community development. Will they explain the maintenance issues? I do not understand why anybody would be prevented from coming in to deal with basic maintenance issues for the site itself. That sounds like pure intimidation. Is that the case? I know they do not represent the site but I want to hear their opinion on it.

Ms Brigid Carmody: In my opinion, it is because of frustration at someone being told that somebody is getting something, such as electrical works, that their son or daughter is not going to get.

People are frustrated and again, we would say that there should be prosecutions for this.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: That frustration is around what is going to happen to Spring Lane. It is not about the maintenance. Even basic maintenance has been stopped now because there is a general view that some are not happy with what is proposed for the site and not everybody is going to get the same facilities or services. Even basic maintenance-----

Ms Brigid Carmody: What I would say is that not everybody on the site is intimidating workers. The families on that site cannot police themselves. One can only be responsible for one's own family. We in the Cork Traveller Women's Network only work with women. We are a community development project. A lot of women from that site are members of our network and they tell us that they want the development to happen. They want the site built. They want Ellis' Yard built and they want the third site built. They want better homes for their

children but there are some who do not live on the site who are causing intimidation. The community on the site cannot do anything about that, no more than I can. That is a policing and security issue that needs to be dealt with.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: From Ms Carmody's perspective, how will we deal with this? What would her advice be to get to the bottom of this issue? How can we turn the situation around so that everybody is lined up in the same way, everybody wants to go in the one direction, the resources that are already available can be spent and the site can be developed? What needs to be done to move everybody in the one direction?

Ms Brigid Carmody: That site is owned by Cork City Council and the council needs to take control of its site. If that means prosecutions, then we need prosecutions. I know from working with the women that there are women and children on that site who are desperate for homes. They cannot police themselves and they cannot go out and tell others that they cannot stop workers from coming on site. They cannot police themselves. They have to live there. If there is intimidation, then it needs to be dealt with by security and there needs to be prosecutions.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Would Ms O'Donoghue agree with that?

Ms Breda O'Donoghue: Yes, although I do not work on the site. Our men's development worker, John, works on the site. He is joining us remotely but unfortunately, I do not think the issues with the remote system have been sorted. I would agree with Brigid all round. The questions I would have would be for Cork City Council. I live on a social housing estate. What would happen if repairs needed to be done to a home four doors up from me, my repairs were not yet done or approved and I went up and stopped those repairs from happening? That is my question today.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank everyone for being here today. I apologise for being late but I had a clash with a meeting of the public accounts committee. I will start with the council. In terms of the staffing of the Traveller accommodation unit the council said in its statement that there are seven full-time staff and one part-time staff. Has that been the case for some time or is that additionality in recent times?

Mr. Brian Geaney: We have actually increased the staffing. To be fair to any local authority, that would be a substantial resource and it has been augmented with a technical resource as well. We have gone upwards in recent years rather than backwards.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: In reference to the presentation, which I have looked at, the images are quite shocking it has to be said. For any human beings to be living in those conditions in this day and age is quite frightening and shocking. How many people are living in Spring Lane?

Mr. Brian Geaney: There are approximately 55 families there.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: There are 55 families. Just doing the maths in terms of the proposed development, there are 27 units proposed. What is the plan in terms of the numbers? How does that equate?

Mr. Brian Geaney: There would be a mixture of standard housing. On the third site that we spoke about that was previously impacted by the northern distributor road, there are 16 units.

So, in total we are looking at 43 units on Ellis' Yard, Spring Lane and what we call the third site.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: That still falls short in terms of the number of families.

Mr. Brian Geaney: Not everyone looks for Traveller-specific accommodation.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I understand, yes.

Mr. Brian Geaney: There would be families that would look for standard housing and the Traveller accommodation unit would be engaging with families in that regard.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: There would be some families who would look for standard social housing as part of their long-term needs.

Mr. Brian Geaney: Yes. The Deputy will be familiar with our choice-based letting system. Previously, we actually had a confined choice-based letting system in terms of a number of houses that would just be made available, in terms of Spring Lane, with some success. We are looking at doing something similar in the not too distant future. These would be a system just open to families in Spring Lane itself.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Does Mr Geaney believe that between the development on this site, the additional site and regular accommodation, the families can be catered for in the medium term?

Mr. Brian Geaney: In terms of families that reside on Spring Lane, yes.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Does Mr. Geaney believe there is the capacity to provide for the long-term accommodation needs of those families in the coming short number of years?

Mr. Brian Geaney: Yes.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I note the tender has gone out and the council expects that to close in December. How confident is Mr. Geaney that there will be sufficient interest from contractors? I know that is a difficult question to answer.

Mr. Brian Geaney: We have issued it through a framework panel that is already there. They would be contractors of a substantial size. In terms of contractors carrying out that job, we would hope there will be some innovation used in terms of precast or modular-type homes. I am referring to normal modular construction which means that they can get in and out of the site pretty quickly. I would say so and we certainly hope there will be interest.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: There would be a degree of off-site construction. Is that what Mr. Geaney means? The contractors would be off site-----

Mr. Brian Geaney: Yes, that is one of the potential options that contractors that may tender would be interested in.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: In terms of the needs of the residents while the construction is going on, is there a plan in place for that?

Mr. Brian Geaney: There will be ongoing maintenance, if we can. A number of families have expressed an interest in either moving to Ellis' Yard, remaining in Spring Lane or moving to the third site.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Brigid mentioned earlier that there was a loss of hope and that people were wondering if this was ever going to happen. Is Mr. Geaney confident that this will happen?

Mr. Brian Geaney: Yes. The process that we are using for both sites is competitive dialogue which we have used successfully previously. Once tenders come back in December, we could go to construction within a reasonable period after that. In respect of the third site, that is being done through competitive dialogue as well. Part 8 was approved and we could get to construction pretty quickly there. I would expect that both sites would start construction next year.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I want to go back to the issue of contractors leaving the site and the ongoing work that is needed, including electrical work and so on. Mr. Geaney said that the council has gone through several contractors because of intimidation issues and so on. What level of co-operation is the council getting from An Garda Síochána on that? The council must have a lot of interaction with gardaí in relation to those issues.

Mr. Brian Geaney: Yes, we do. In fairness, our own Lord Mayor facilitated discussions between gardaí and ourselves after the most recent incident. In fairness, there is very good co-operation with the local Garda station. It is a matter of public record that the emergency response unit, ERU, attended the site in pretty substantial numbers after that incident.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Everyone here agrees that it is probably a small number of people who are causing issues. Are there charges being brought forward? Do we know or can Mr. Geaney say at this stage?

Mr. Brian Geaney: There certainly was a Garda investigation. I cannot confirm whether that has concluded at this stage, but there certainly was an investigation.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I would like to touch on some other developments now. We have been focusing heavily on Spring Lane, and deservedly so, but in terms of the proposed construction projects at Nash's Boreen and Ballycurreen, I ask Mr. Geaney to provide a quick update on where things stand.

Mr. Brian Geaney: Again, it might be Ms Dennehy or Ms Broderick who could come in on that. On Ballycureen and Nash's Boreen, there has been a lot of engagement there with the family involved in terms of going ahead with an initial phase of-----

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Are both of these developments in relation to sites where Travellers are currently residing?

Mr. Brian Geaney: Yes.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Okay. So, it is to provide longer-term sustainable accommodation-----

Mr. Brian Geaney: On site.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: -----on those sites.

Mr. Brian Geaney: Yes.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I appreciate that. I appreciate that all sides have a difficult job here. It is a complex area in trying to deal with the day-to-day issues and also plan for the future in terms of providing long-term accommodation. I respect the work that is being done by all sides but I also understand the concern and the deep frustration around the lack of progress as well. I know Mr. Geaney from working through the city council on different projects. He and the team are well-intentioned here and are trying their best. If they have a degree of confidence that they can express here today, that gives us some hope. Hopefully, we will have them back here when we can see credible progress in those projects.

An Cathaoirleach: Are incidents of intimidation relatively new over the past few years or is it something that has been historical on the site?

Mr. Brian Geaney: To be fair, as the sites become more overcrowded, it is probably more prevalent in recent years.

An Cathaoirleach: Therein lies the nub of the issue. People are becoming angry and frustrated as a result of the conditions they find themselves living in. I was a member of Wexford County Council for 20 years. The antisocial behaviour, which it is and probably a bit further, is indicative of the way local authorities treat antisocial behaviour. In my experience they throw their hands up and say there is nothing they can do because if they go before a court, the judge will rule against the local authority. It is something we really have to grasp, as a country, to empower our local authorities - to empower the witnesses - to deal with this. As it stands, we have individuals destroying communities. It is happening right across the country. I know that is a separate issue.

The frustration comes from the fact that the people are living in such appalling conditions. If it was me, I would be very angry if someone's situation was being improved and I was living there years and my situation was not going to be improved. Is the answer to look at this as a collective and as how we can we improve everybody's lot here? I know it predates Mr. Geaney but, to be fair, the pictures show a litany of failure over decades. These issues - the craters or potholes - have not arrived overnight. The conditions have not arrived overnight This is decades of failure by the local authorities. It is not just Cork City Council or Cork County Council; it is every local authority.

The witnesses spoke about the Traveller accommodation committee meetings. We have had evidence of how inept those meetings are. I know that one of the proposals is to have a permanent chairperson of the Traveller accommodation committees for five years rather than a mayor or cathaoirleach coming in every year and being the *ex officio* chairperson. It is about having Traveller accommodation committees that are structured, have meaning and have a statutory basis in terms of meetings. We have had people giving evidence here that they travelled 40 miles to a meeting only for it to be cancelled five minutes before it was due to begin. If this disrespect is shown, how do the councils expect to bring people on board and to move forward if they are not taking seriously enough a simple thing like a Traveller accommodation committee meeting and ensuring that it actually goes ahead with the proper people in place? Local authorities have consistently and across the board basically washed their hands of everything relating to Traveller accommodation. This has not happened overnight. It is something that has occurred over the past 30 or 40 years. It really is a demonstration of failure. As I have said, it was not in Mr. Geaney's bailiwick for all those years but it is difficult to hear the local authority defend what has gone on for over 40 years and

should have been tackled long before we got to this situation. If I was living in the conditions experienced by the people who are living in Spring Lane, the Garda emergency response unit would probably be in my house as well because that is a reaction to squalor and deprivation and inaction. It is not just something that has occurred in a short period of time. This is decades of oppression and constantly being downtrodden and - I may sound preachy here - a local authority abandoning the community. That is all I can describe it as, from viewing the photos.

I want to bring in Senator Rabbitte.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I was listening to the contributions. There was something that Ms O'Donoghue said about going forward. I think everybody wants to go forward. Is there any way we can do timelines on this? Timelines is the one thing we have not discussed.

An Cathaoirleach: It is one of the questions I was going to ask Mr. Geaney.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Thank you.

An Cathaoirleach: When can Mr. Geaney come back to us with a progress report? Often we see meetings being held, with fine talk and aspirations, but we need delivery now. Perhaps the witnesses could come back in January or February to give us a progress report. The last thing we want, as the Senator has alluded to, is a situation where we are sitting here having fine chats but there is no delivery. We would like to see delivery. Perhaps they could come back to us in January or February.

Mr. Brian Geaney: There are just a couple of things. I think we would all agree, in fairness, that the chair of the local Traveller accommodation consultative committee, LTACC, Councillor Oliver Moran, is very committed to the betterment of Traveller accommodation in the city. He was chair of the LTACC in the last council as well.

An Cathaoirleach: Yes, but has Mr. Geaney considered the structure? It was ten and a half hours in 12 months. I am not saying anything about Mr. Moran, absolutely not. I believe he is a very fine public representative, particularly in this area. As I said, it is not just Cork City Council, but spent ten and a half hours in a year was spent talking about an issue when this issue alone would command multiples of that.

Mr. Brian Geaney: If more meetings are required, I am sure the chair would be amenable to making that happen. There are very committed people on the LTACC. I fully accept that it is years and decades of overcrowding on the site. In terms of improvements, we will try to carry out some short-term measures but really we are probably into next year in terms of starting.

An Cathaoirleach: If we could even find out where we are at so the start is not kicked down the road, that would be something.

Mr. Brian Geaney: I would not be here today giving timelines unless I was confident of the timelines for getting the developments-----

An Cathaoirleach: Will Mr. Geaney come back to us in February and give us an update and a progress report?

Mr. Brian Geaney: Absolutely, yes.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I apologise that I did not hear the full contributions. It is good to see there is a timeline. About two and a half or three years ago the whole issue of Spring Lane came up. Myself and my party in Cork made a very detailed submission where we met with the residents on the site, resident groups that support the residents, the broader community and the council officials. A lot of work went into the design of the site. It was looked at and finally we had a design and a proposal that would go forward. I remember we had a lot of frank discussions but we felt that we had got it between everyone involved and that we would move forward. This is why it is so disappointing that we have not made progress earlier. I thought we would be finished by now or, if not finished, at least partly finished. When I was elected to Cork City Council back in 2009, there was a proposal on the table. It was a bad proposal. I felt that this new proposal would deliver. The problem is that back in 2009 there were 33 families resident on the site and my information is that there are now more than 60. One big criticism I have of Cork City Council and the Garda is they never secured the site.

I pointed out at the time my worry that more families would go onto the site and I pointed to the lack of washing facilities, toilets and space. As the witnesses know, there were areas of Spring Lane where water would pool. E. coli was also found. I walked the site a couple of times. Another site should have been developed years ago. The problem is that Spring Lane was allowed to expand to over 60 families.

The first thing that should be done is the site should be secured to ensure no additional families come onto it. There is a huge amount of work to be done to address the conditions on the site, including the lack of electricity and other facilities. The problem is the bigger the site gets, the more work it needs. It is a catch-22 situation for the families who are there.

I remember the history of this. Geographically, the site is not Spring Lane. The families originally came to the old Spring Lane site 500 yd down the road. When they moved to the current site 30 or 40 years ago, ten bays were put in. It was just a concreted area and 16 families moved in. The day that site opened, it was already overcrowded.

An Cathaoirleach: The two ladies, Ms Carmody and Ms O'Donoghue, have to leave at 2.15 p.m. We will let them respond to the Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I ask the deputy city manager of Cork City Council to secure the site and then start the work as quickly as possible. I am working with families on the site who will take social housing. Not all of them will, but a few would. That offer should be made today. I will finish there.

Ms Brigid Carmody: Ms O'Donoghue and I have a train to catch at 3 p.m., so we will leave soon.

I thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to attend. I welcome that Cork City Council will come back to the Oireachtas early next year. I would be happy to go back up to the site and take more photographs because it helps the committee to see the conditions on the site. We would be happy to do that and come back to the committee, if necessary.

An Cathaoirleach: Dialogue is everything.

Ms Breda O'Donoghue: I thank Deputy Gould. We all recognise that mistakes have been made in the past and that this is a huge and complex issue that needs to be taken on. We are here today because that has not been done but we are not saying it was an easy task in the first

place. To be fair to everybody involved, particularly the families on the site, it is 100% not their fault. It was a situation that grew out of control, and not only because it is in Cork city and the Ballyvolane area. This is a direct result of an Act introduced in 2002 that criminalised Travellers for living a nomadic lifestyle. What happened across the country was that Travellers had to scurry off to the nearest halting site because they had nowhere else to go. We are now dealing with the fallout of that. The problem is not an easy one to fix but it is fixable.

What is wrong with building seven sites around Cork? In the past 30 years, we could have had at least six or seven sites built around Cork. That would have alleviated all the pressure we have now.

On my behalf and on behalf of Ms Carmody, I thank the committee for having us here today and giving us an opportunity to talk and to show the committee what life on the ground is like for the families on the site. I also thank the officials from Cork City Council. They have spoken with us from time to time. As I have said from the beginning, this is not the fault of one person. It is an old problem that got out of hand and somebody has to fix it now. We are here to help anybody who is willing to do that.

Ms Brigid Carmody: I would love to go back to the families and tell them that, in the short term, we will make it as comfortable as possible for them while they are waiting for developments. It would build up trust with the families if they saw work being done on the site, on potholes, sewerage and exposed pipes. As I said, there was a fire on 17 September. We certainly do not want anything like that to happen again. That would be a way of building up trust with the families or confidence that Cork City Council wants to do something. That could alleviate the conflict on the site or the pressure whereby people are refusing to allow workers to come into the site.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Ms Carmody and Ms O'Donoghue.

Ms Breda O'Donoghue: I thank all the members. We will run out the door now because we have to get back to Heuston Station.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I wish Ms Carmody and Ms O'Donoghue safe home. I ask Mr. Geaney for his response.

Mr. Brian Geaney: On standard housing, we have operated a confined choice based lettings, CBL, process on that. Ms Dennehy and her team are engaging with people the whole time. A couple of weeks ago, someone who had been offered a unit would not sign a tenancy agreement. We cannot have such situations. We have to be fair to other people on the housing list who will sign a tenancy agreement and will pay that. We are preparing another confined CBL process for people who want to avail of standard housing. We fully accept that the overcrowding situation on the site needs to be-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: My main concern is the one I have been raising for 17 years. I am working with Ms Broderick, Mr. Geaney and others. We could help to house a number of families but the following day another family could move onto the site.

I recognise that Cork City Council has tried to secure the site over the years. There has been damage done but that is why the Garda has to ensure the site is secure. To me, securing it is the number one issue because we would then know how many families are on the site and a plan could be put in place. There was a plan to house a certain number of people in social

housing and a certain number in the new development. Once the new development was done in Ellis's Yard, the Spring Lane site would be done. It was a combination of the three different elements.

If that site had been secured in 2009, we would not have the current problem. I know eight, ten or 12 families who have been housed over those years. The number of families on the site would have been down to 20, which would be manageable, and the plan would have gone ahead. A lot of work has been done. I ask Mr. Geaney to give that commitment. He and his colleagues could be back at this committee next February and there could be five more families on the site.

The living conditions in Spring Lane are intolerable. The Ombudsman for Children has said that children should not be on the site but we are going to allow more families onto it. Cork City Council has a duty of care to ensure that no child will be allowed to go onto that site in its current condition.

Mr. Brian Geaney: I am unable to give the Deputy the guarantee on security today because we are not dealing with an ordinary security situation. That is all I can say on that. In my opening statement, I spoke about the various issues, such as the ERU attending the site regularly and gardaí and the emergency services attending it. To be fair to any security company, it would be unfair of me to say that putting a security company at the entrance to the site would control access to and from the site. Through the years, the council has put in lots of different measures to try to control. The Deputy will be aware of the circumstances with regard to some of those measures. They were obviously taken down.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I know security has been on the site and barriers were put up to ensure no one else could move onto the site. I have to be honest. That cannot be accepted. There is no way people can be allowed do what they want. We are talking about children here. What about an adult? An adult has the choice to go onto or to leave the site, but children do not have that choice. No other child should be brought onto that site. There are huge implications here for children and their well-being.

I ask Cork City Council to look at this again. The site must be secured to ensure that no other families are able to move onto it and that the necessary infrastructure is put in place with the support of the ladies from the Traveller Visibility Group Cork and Cork Traveller Women's Network who were before the committee earlier.

To go back to the point made earlier about Cork City Council's Traveller accommodation group, I know that it and the chair do good work. They get a lot of slack for it, but they are genuine people trying to do the right thing. We must secure the site so that no more children can enter it. The ladies outlined the conditions in it. If something drastic needs to be done from the point of view of infrastructure, funding or the Garda, I ask Cork City Council to look at it.

Mr. Brian Geaney: We are constantly looking at it but I will give the Deputy that commitment. We will look at it.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Gabhaim buíochas leis an bhfinné.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the witnesses for their attendance today. I hope they found the meeting useful. We look forward to meeting them in the first quarter of 2027 to see what

progress, if any, has been made on this important issue. The committee now stands adjourned until 12.30 p.m. on Thursday, 22 October.

Cuireadh an comhchoiste ar athló ar 2.21 p.m. go dtí 12.30 p.m., Déardaoin, an 22 Deireadh Fómhair 2026.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.21 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Thursday, 22 October 2026.