DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

Dé Máirt, 1 Meitheamh 2021

Tuesday, 1 June 2021

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
Joan Collins,	Rebecca Moynihan,
Patrick Costello,	Joe O'Reilly,
Dessie Ellis,	Ned O'Sullivan.
Denise Mitchell,	
Éamon Ó Cuív.	

Seanadóir / Senator Eileen Flynn sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Traveller Accommodation: Discussion

Chairman: I welcome our witnesses. Before I introduce them and we hear from them, I wish to mention apologies that have been received from some Deputies and Senators, including Deputies Bríd Smith and David Stanton, who cannot make the meeting.

I thank the Business Committee for organising and facilitating our meeting in public session. I remind members that they must be in Leinster House or in the grounds of the convention centre in Dublin to attend this meeting. If members attempt to participate from outside the Leinster House precincts, I will ask them to leave the meeting.

I also remind witnesses that as they are giving evidence from outside Leinster House, they may not have the same privilege as if they were attending in Leinster House. They may feel it is appropriate to take legal advice on the matter. They are again reminded they should not criticise or make charges against any person or damage the good name of any person. They must stop if I state they are breaking the rules.

I propose we approve the minutes of our previous meeting held on 18 May. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Today we will receive submissions and hear about Traveller accommodation. It is our first public session in which we will meet witnesses regarding Traveller accommodation. I am honoured to be the first Traveller to chair this committee. I am also honoured that we have started with accommodation because we know of the major inequalities Travellers face in this area. I welcome the Irish Traveller Movement, ITM, the National Travellers Women's Network and Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre to this session on Traveller accommodation. Before we hear from our witnesses, I propose we publish their opening statements and submissions to the committee website.

On behalf of the committee, I am delighted to welcome Ms Jacinta Brack, co-ordinator of political advocacy, communications and campaigns, and Ms RoseMarie Maughan and Ms Emily Murtagh, both of whom are national accommodation policy officers, ITM; Ms Bridget Kelly, community development worker, and Ms Maria Joyce, co-ordinator, National Travellers Women's Network; and Mr. Martin Collins, Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre. I suggest that each organisation make an opening statement of five to ten minutes maximum. We will then have questions and comments from members of the committee of five minutes maximum.

I invite Ms RoseMarie Maughan to make her opening statement.

Ms RoseMarie Maughan: To reiterate what the Chairman has said, today is a very historic and special day, given that Traveller organisations are invited here today to present to a committee with the first Traveller chairperson, who is a Traveller woman. I want to acknowledge that. I thank all members of the committee for the opportunity to highlight matters related to the Traveller accommodation crisis and to consider actions to alleviate the ongoing crisis in delivering a home for Travellers.

Despite legislative protection since 1998, there are currently 2,000 families living in inadequate, unsafe conditions in shared and overcrowded accommodation or on roadsides. The current Traveller accommodation programmes show a need nationally to supply for 2,871 families. While this figure is thought to be an underestimate, either way, the current programmes are not fit for purpose and only 22 local authorities plan to address the full identified need in their area.

It is important to remember that when I am talking about statistics, I am talking about Traveller men, women and especially children who are forced to live in dreadful conditions, even today, in Ireland in 2021.

In 2020, just 16 new units of Traveller-specific accommodation were built or refurbished - seven houses, no additional bays and nine welfare units. So far this year, just €1.7 million has been drawn down from the Traveller accommodation capital budget, a repeated pattern by local authorities since the beginning of the programmes. There is low intention but sanctions have not been put in place. Between the years 2008 and 2019, more than €72 million was unspent by local authorities, without the necessary oversight in place to intervene and with no sanctions applied. Investment by Government declined from €120 million for the first Traveller accommodation programme, TAP, from 2000 to 2004 to just €33 million for the latest TAP. Annual budgets showed the allocation in 2008 was €40 million compared to just €14.5 million in 2020. The sad reality is that regardless of the amount of the budget that is put aside for Traveller-specific accommodation, year after year it goes unspent. That has to change because Traveller children are left in dire conditions. There is no excuse for that in Ireland today, especially when the money is there. The budget is not the issue.

Despite the report of the expert review in 2019, the 2017 review of funding for Traveller-specific accommodation and the implementation of TAPs by the Housing Agency, there is still no national oversight or accountability when local authorities set low or no targets for delivery of Traveller-specific accommodation, do not account for future population growth in their plans and do not reach their own targets within the period. I have to beg the question of what other community this would be done to, and what other children would be left without toilets and without water, not just now, but for decades.

Travellers are more disproportionately affected than any other group in official homeless figures, accounting for as high as 50% of people within the homeless emergency services, despite comprising less than 1% of the overall population. We have heard testimonies and heartbreaking stories of families living for close to four years in emergency accommodation, driving an 80 km distance to another county to try to save their children's education. That should not be happening in today's Ireland. Thousands more families are trapped in hidden homelessness caused by grossly inadequate and overcrowded accommodation, and they are not even recognised as homeless. Some are sharing bays, houses or rundown trailers, often on local authority-owned sites where these conditions are known by local authorities. Many wake up to leaking roofs, rats, chronic damp and mould on their blankets, and some are forced to share a Portaloo with 15 other people. This is their normal, forced state of living.

There are 2,800 Travellers living on unofficial sites, most without stable electricity, sanitation or any security of tenure. They risk eviction on a daily basis and criminalisation for being Travellers, but with no place to go. Babies are born into situations that in any other country would be deemed an international scandal but, unfortunately, in Ireland, it is brushed under the carpet. Some poor little babies have chronic health conditions and come home to a situation where they cannot access a stable electricity supply to support their medical equipment.

These figures and these heartbreaking stories are unacceptable by any standard. Behind them are families, humans, Travellers. We heard powerful stories in the Ombudsman for Children's report last week, where Traveller children described their home as "like an abandoned place that people forgot about. It's like we're forgotten. We feel like garbage". No child should be inflicted with that trauma but, unfortunately, Traveller children are. Those children number upwards of 3,000. While the site in Cork investigated is among the worst in the country, there

are many across the country, especially in Dublin's four local authorities. An Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, report covering all local authority Traveller accommodation responsibilities is still awaited, almost two years after its planned publication. Again, it must be a priority to have that published. Children on those sites are unduly burdened by the inaction of local authorities, which are duty-bound to provide accommodation but instead have failed them. We know that the insecurity arising from poor accommodation has a profound effect on life opportunities and has been the cause of many of my community experiencing intergenerational poverty, disadvantage, poor health and trauma.

Covid-19 highlighted the crisis further and brought it more centre stage. While the ministerial intervention offered in 2020 is to be applauded, unfortunately, much was left undone. So far this year, just €89,550 has been drawn down for this purpose. The outcomes of a report on the 31 local authorities' responses to Covid-19 in Traveller accommodation are unclear. It took Covid-19 for some families to get water and portable toilets as a temporary emergency measure. If Covid-19 had not come into our lives, those families would still be without water and portable toilets. There has to be a strategy where those services are permanent to families and their permanent accommodation needs are met.

We welcome progress being made in establishing the programme board to oversee recommendations of the expert review of Traveller accommodation. These need to be accelerated as soon as possible and time made up for delays in 2020. There is a need for an independent national Traveller accommodation authority to oversee those recommendations. Funds must be ring-fenced for implementation of the 32 recommendations. Otherwise, we fear they will not be implemented and the good work that is starting to happen will be undone. It is crucial a circumventing of Part 8 of the planning process to An Bord Pleanála should feature in the future plans as recommended by the expert group.

Criminalising nomadism represents the State's policy going back to the 1963 Report of the Commission on Itinerancy, which set the tone for decades afterwards. It was a report that was developed about us without us. We must be the generation to undo the damage and trauma that inflicted. The only way we can do that is by working together to ensure the 32 recommendations of the expert group report are implemented so that Traveller children no longer suffer and are no longer hidden on the margins of society.

We refer the Chair to the recommendations made in our submission to the committee and are happy to provide any further information.

Chairman: I thank Ms Maughan for her very powerful presentation. The truth of what Traveller communities still go through is very sad.

Ms Bridget Kelly: I thank the Chair and the committee for giving us the opportunity to speak here on Traveller accommodation. The National Traveller Women's Forum is a national network of Traveller women and Traveller organisations throughout Ireland.

As minority ethnic women, Traveller women and girls are among the most marginalised and excluded individuals and groups in Ireland, experiencing poorer health and educational outcomes, extreme poverty, inadequate housing, high levels of unemployment, discrimination and racism, and lack of access to mainstream services.

Housing has a particular effect on Traveller women as they spend more time in the home and are the primary carers, so they bear the brunt of having to cope with the most basic conditions

such as a lack of clean running water, lack of adequate refuse collection, poor sanitation and unsafe areas for children to play in.

There are also huge shortcomings in provision for Traveller women experiencing violence against them. The refuges provided in Ireland do not meet the Istanbul Convention standards of one family place per 10,000 population. It has also highlighted the lack of gendered analysis of homelessness, which means women and children fleeing domestic violence are not categorised as homeless, nor are they integrated into strategies dealing with housing and homelessness. This has meant refuges struggle to access resources and referral pathways for women when it comes to accessing safe and secure accommodation and housing.

As one of the key determinants of health, accommodation has also contributed to Traveller children being 3.6 times more vulnerable to not surviving the first year of their life, and to 50% being not expected to live beyond the age of 40 years. The recent report by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, No End in Site, presents a very chilling insight into the lives of children living on a site where there has been 30 years of failure by a local authority.

The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government's annual count reported for 2019 that more than one in ten Travellers, or 13.5%, are effectively homeless. These statistics obscure the reality of homelessness and accommodation conditions within the Traveller community.

We have a Traveller accommodation crisis and a wider housing crisis in Ireland, and the long-term lack of accommodation provision has pushed many Travellers into sharing accommodation and onto overcrowded and unauthorised sites. These families are not reflected in Government statistics on homelessness, and we know the situation is deteriorating. Some 504 Travellers were in emergency accommodation in the Dublin area in 2019 and 23% of homeless families in Kerry are Traveller families. Anecdotally, we also know that 50% of families in homeless services in Galway city are Travellers.

Living in overcrowded conditions has prevented Traveller women self-isolating when they have contracted Covid-19. The lack of access to running water makes it difficult to comply with guidelines on hand hygiene and social distancing in an effort to stop the spread of the virus. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on Travellers as well as having a particular impact on women and girls. Issues that Traveller women face in terms of housing and homelessness have been greatly exacerbated, especially for those most vulnerable in the communities. While the Traveller accommodation unit, TAU, in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage issued a circular for local authorities advising them to take all necessary measures to ensure safety of Traveller families, there were still issues in the roll-out of Covid-19 measures at local level in some local authorities. In these instances, funding and guidance was not a barrier at national level.

The implementation of the recommendations of the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act expert review in full is crucial to ensuring an adequate supply and adequate standards of culturally appropriate accommodation for Travellers. Clear timelines, a budget for implementation, tangible targets with corresponding accountability measures along with strong Traveller engagement at all levels will be essential for delivery. The Government must commit to including clear actions, targets, indicators, outcomes, timeframes and adequate resources in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy and the National Strategy for Women and Girls to address the accommodation and homelessness crisis experienced by Traveller women and girls. Women and children being accommodated in emergency refuge accommodation must be

represented in homeless statistics, and additional funding is needed to ensure women living in violent situations are fast-tracked to access secure and affordable long-term housing options.

Chairman: I thank Ms Kelly for her presentation. It is always so hard to hear the inequalities that Traveller women and children, and the community as a whole, still face in 21st century Ireland. It is a remarkable day. Accommodation has been an issue over the past week and it is important we keep bringing attention to it.

Mr. Martin Collins: I also endorse the comments made by RoseMarie Maughan at the beginning of the session acknowledging that this is a truly historic moment to see a member of our own community chairing such a committee. It will be an even greater day when, like Senator Flynn, we see other Travellers chairing standing committees of the Oireachtas. I hope that day will not be too far into the future.

When opening this session, the Chairperson used the term "witness". It is an appropriate term in this context because the three national organisations are again today bearing witness to the ongoing systemic failure of this State to meet the accommodation needs of Travellers. Ms Kelly and Ms Maughan very eloquently articulated some of the very shocking statistics that are a manifestation of that failure. There has been an increase in the number of Travellers becoming homeless and an increase in the number of Travellers living in overcrowded conditions on sites and group housing schemes, which bring many problems in terms of fire hazards and tension among families.

The unspent budget has been already alluded to. Since 2017, €69 million has been unspent on Traveller accommodation, which is shocking. The Traveller budget in 2000 was €135 million. In 2017, it was €20 million. Despite the budget having been reduced, it is still not being fully utilised or drawn down by the local authorities to meet the basic human rights of many Traveller families throughout the State. The implications of this are severe in terms of access to education, employment, healthcare and mental health well-being. These are manifestations of people being forced to live in cramped, overcrowded conditions and not having access to basic services such as electricity, water, sanitation or refuse collection. As already alluded to, this was amplified in the context of Covid-19 when many Travellers could not comply with the basic public health guidelines in terms of social distancing and handwashing. If that does not constitute a humanitarian crisis, I do not know what does. We have to be honest and name it a humanitarian crisis.

The Irish State has been consistently in breach of the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, which places a legal obligation on local authorities to undertake an accommodation needs assessment and to develop TAPs on that basis. International human rights bodies have found Ireland to be in breach of its obligations in terms of the provision of Traveller accommodation. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and many others have found Ireland to be in breach of its international human rights obligations, and this continues to be the case.

In terms of what needs to happen, the problems have been well rehearsed and well documented by all of the Traveller organisations and well articulated today by all of the witnesses. We have also come up with solutions, such as, for example, the call for a moratorium on evictions. It is immoral that local authorities continue to evict Travellers when those same local authorities have failed to implement their Traveller accommodation programmes and failed to draw down the budget available in that regard from the Department of Housing, Local Gov-

ernment and Heritage. A moratorium on evictions is vital. This has been called for by other international human rights organisations. We also need a national independent agency whose remit is to drive forward Traveller policy on a whole range of fronts.

It is clear to all of us that the local authority system structure is inherently unable and incapable of providing Travellers with their basic accommodation needs. Traveller accommodation is too heavily politicised at local authority level. Many public representatives are, unfortunately, objecting to Traveller accommodation, playing the race card. We see that all too frequently. We know that many local authorities are not brave enough even to propose building Traveller accommodation. Therefore, the evidence points in one direction, that is, this power needs to be taken away from the local authorities. They have failed miserably. We need a new approach, a new structure and a depoliticising of these issues such that we can get on and do the job that needs to be done. I am reminded of a quote from Jean-Claude Juncker, a former President of the European Commission, when addressing a conference a number of years ago on Roma and Traveller issues. He said, "We all know what to do, but we don't know how to get re-elected once we have done it." That is the core issue: the issue of Traveller accommodation is too heavily politicised. There is a strong evidence base and rationale for Traveller accommodation to be taken out of the hands of local authorities.

I am not sure if members of the committee are aware that today is International Children's Day. I mention it in light of the recent report of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in regard to Spring Lane, which highlighted the appalling and deplorable conditions in which families have been forced to live for many years. Let there be no mistake about it, as stated by my colleagues, that is not an isolated incident. What is happening at Spring Lane is prevalent throughout the country. In almost every county in Ireland there are families living in similar conditions. It is shameful and shocking. As a Traveller man, I do not become desensitised to it. It is appalling and shocking. It is shameful and an indictment on society that we allow this situation to continue. I need to be frank. The State and all of its institutions by their inaction have been complicit in allowing this situation to prevail. I call on the policymakers, the decision-makers and legislators to work with the Traveller organisations to develop a new approach to an old problem. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. We have been trying the same approach for more than 30 years with the same result, that is, Travellers being let down.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Collins. I will now open up the meeting to members.

Senator Ned O'Sullivan: I asked to be allowed to speak first because I will have to leave this meeting shortly for another equally important committee meeting. I welcome our guests. I missed some of the earlier presentations, unfortunately. I will be brief as I am sure other members have questions to ask and points to make. I will focus my first remarks on what Mr. Collins had to say. I empathise with him. I have a reasonable amount of experience of how local authorities deal with the Traveller community. I was previously mayor of Kerry and I was a councillor in Kerry for 22 years. There are two sides to every story. There have been very few occasions in Kerry where members of the Traveller community were guilty of antisocial behaviour, but members of the non-Traveller community are also guilty of antisocial behaviour. The town of Listowel, where I come from, has a good record and a long settled Traveller community. We work well together and everything is fine.

When I was mayor of Kerry, a number of people objected to Travellers being housed in a particular estate. They were vehement and there were many public meetings called. As Mr. Collins mentioned, we all have to be elected. To give credit where it is due, the officials of the

council and I, as mayor, faced down those objections. I still have some of the letters of abuse I received, which would cause the hairs on your head to stand. The people who were allocated the houses are some of the most exemplary tenants Kerry County Council has ever had.

It was mentioned that some councils are not playing their part or taking up the budgets allocated to them. Would Mr. Collins, the clerk to the committee or the Department be able to furnish me and the other members with statistics as to how much of the budget each county council took up, not just this year or last year but maybe even over a five-year or ten-year period, in order that we could make a league table out of the statistics? If councils are not playing their part, they must be outed.

We could talk about this all day long. There is loads more I would love to say to the other members and to Mr. Collins but I have to conclude. I will listen as long as I can.

Chairman: Thank you, Senator. Just note that there is no such thing as a settled Traveller. I now open up the floor to the committee to answer your questions.

Senator Ned O'Sullivan: Sorry. I did not mean-----

Chairman: That is fine. I am just offering the more correct information. I am just doing my job. That is all.

Senator Ned O'Sullivan: We live and learn.

Chairman: Mr. Collins, would you like to come back in to respond to Senator O'Sullivan?

Mr. Martin Collins: The information the Senator seeks is on the public record. It is available through replies to various Oireachtas parliamentary questions, from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and from the Traveller organisations. In addition, ITM has done some really good analysis of those statistics. That information is readily available and broken down by local authority. Again, it points in one direction: the shocking failure of the State. Something I forgot to mention, which puts this into context, is that in 2012 the Department with responsibility for housing did a piece of research, to which I think Ms Kelly alluded, which found that one in ten Travellers, effectively 13.5% of Travellers, was homeless. Using the census figures of 2016, that is the equivalent of 657,139 people in the majority population without a home. That puts it into context. If that does not constitute a humanitarian crisis, I do not know what does. If there were 657,139 people homeless in the settled community, that would be declared a national emergency, yet when it happens to our community, it does not get the same status or acknowledgement. It is dismissed, in fact.

Chairman: Would any of the other witnesses like to make any comments in reply to Senator O'Sullivan?

Ms RoseMarie Maughan: Yes, I would. I thank the Senator for his comments and for being one of the very rare politicians who stands up for the delivery of Traveller-specific accommodation. I am sorry to hear about the ongoing abuse he received in the aftermath of his making the right choice. It highlights the reality of Traveller-specific accommodation delivery across the country and brings us back to the reality that we need to bypass the Part 8 stage so we can alleviate this issue and take away that pressure on and abuse of local representatives. It is unfair that they get that but, most importantly, it is unfair that Traveller children are left in inhumane conditions for decades. We have to be the generation that changes that.

To pick up on Mr. Collins's point, the information the Senator seeks is widely available. It is in the public domain. In addition, the ITM has done its own analysis and critique of that. That is available to all committee members and I am sure Ms Brack will forward it all on to them.

I am a bit concerned about the reference to antisocial behaviour. There is antisocial behaviour within every community in Ireland but it is only Travellers who are penalised as a majority and it is only Traveller children who are not afforded their rights because some members of the community engage in antisocial behaviour. It is very concerning that the matter is even brought into the conversation because a minority of people engaging in antisocial behaviour should not lead to or justify the oppression of 40,000 Travellers, which is, as Mr. Collins rightly points out, a humanitarian crisis but not acknowledged as such. We need to start acknowledging the violation of human rights in this country. It is no good looking abroad and seeing the human rights violations in other countries and regions and then turning around and oppressing our own indigenous people for decades. It is no longer good enough.

Chairman: For the information of the Senator, between 2008 and 2019 local authorities underspent by more than €72 million. As Ms Maughan said, it is this committee, this kind of work and people like him that will, we hope, bring about the positive changes for our community as a whole.

I call Deputy Ellis to make his comments. Again, as soon as he has finished speaking, the floor will be open to members and witnesses. If any member at any time would like to come in, I ask them to do so because we have the time.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank Ms Maughan, Ms Kelly and Mr. Collins for their contributions. I have faced many times a lot of the issues Mr. Collins mentioned, such as dealing with councillors and councils in respect of their attitude and their delivery. Local authorities that do not deliver should be penalised and there should be someone to oversee them. Taking this out of the hands of the local authorities could be a bad step, but we could have someone overseeing the local authorities and persistently hounding them to do the right thing and to live up to their budgets. Time out of number we have seen budgets falling behind and not being used, Traveller accommodation getting worse and the number of people looking for accommodation increasing significantly. In Dublin North-West the number of people in the Traveller community looking for accommodation is huge. There is no way anyone should be thinking of evictions in this climate for starters. There should not be evictions, full stop. They should be the very last resort, whether in the settled community or in the Traveller community. In this climate, however, there is no way they should be allowed.

As for depoliticising the issues faced by the Traveller community, we need to politicise people. We need to get to people with attitudes against either Travellers or other races. We need to change that mindset. We have to get at these politicians and get them to understand that this is totally and utterly unacceptable. We watch football matches now and see people kneeling down over racism. We should have a similar attitude towards the Traveller community and any other community that is being treated in a different way or abused in any way. It has to be unacceptable and we need to push the agenda that it is not acceptable and never will be.

For years I have been dealing with Traveller families and I have, I hope, a very good relationship with the vast majority. On Ratoath Road there is the Gavin family: 15 people and no running water. They are getting water brought in in tanks. There is no other supply. There are other issues there. In fairness to Liam Burke, he has been delivering water there for the past month or so but the family have no running water. This goes back to what Ms Maughan said

about running water. It is essential. There are animals, families, men, women and children on these sites. Nearly every person on that site got Covid, yet I am after lobbying every person I can think of, including the Minister, to try to get running water in there. That shows the way people are being treated. It is unacceptable. It has to stop. We must speak out, as people, and make our views known that we do not accept it. I do not stand in the company of anyone who talks racism. I tell them straight that I have no time for it. The same goes for anyone who runs down any other community. I will not stand for it. That is the way we should be. We should be vocal in showing our opposition to the attitude of many people. I apologise for taking so long.

Chairman: Would Ms Kelly like to respond?

Ms Bridget Kelly: In response to Deputy Ellis's comments, he is right that there needs to be accountability and sanctions need to be put in place for local authorities that are not drawing down the Traveller accommodation budget. In the past, the representatives here from Traveller organisations and members listening to the meeting have seen cases where the land and money are there but it does not get across the line. There is no political will. We need to see political will and accountability and sanctions must be put in place. It needs to be looked at more seriously.

In the past, we have also seen cases where managers of local authorities have not used the emergency powers that are in place. Mr. Collins has alluded to this already. It is about forcing the hand of local authorities to use these powers to ensure that our community is provided its basic human right to accommodation and also access to water and electricity.

The Deputy also mentioned Covid. It is sad to say that in 2021 there are still families living in deplorable living conditions with no basic sanitation. Their basic human rights in respect of access to water and electricity, and so on, are not being provided. Their basic human rights are being breached and violated. It must be looked at. The Government and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Housing need to take it on board.

As was mentioned earlier, 32 recommendations are being brought forward to the programme board. We must see those 32 recommendations being implemented. It is key that they are implemented. We need the Minister to be on board with us to ensure they get across the line.

Ms Emily Murtagh: I thank Deputy Ellis and Ms Kelly for their comments. We are fully in agreement with Ms Kelly's points. Deputy Ellis talked about accountability. As Ms Kelly stated, it goes back to the expert review recommendations. One of the key recommendations in terms of governance is the establishment of a national Traveller accommodation authority to oversee the monitoring and delivery of the Traveller accommodation programmes. Each local authority draws up a Traveller accommodation plan every five years. When the plans were published in 2019, the Irish Traveller Movement did a large-scale audit of those 31 Traveller accommodation programmes. A few key themes emerged from the audit, including the inconsistent approach across the different local authorities, how the data were represented and how the need was established. Other themes included the lack of delivery of Traveller-specific accommodation, which has been referenced, and a lack of planning for future need.

The Traveller population is extremely young, with over 60% aged under 25. Travellers also tend to get married at a younger age. When future need is not included in the Traveller accommodation programmes, it causes the homelessness figures to continue to rise. That is all very clearly set out in the Traveller accommodation programmes. If we had a national Traveller accommodation authority to oversee how those plans were drawn up and delivered, it would

make a huge difference. In terms of that delivery, if a pipeline report was published each year to enable us to know what plans were in place for Traveller accommodation for the year, it would provide an extra layer of accountability. That is something that would be easy to put in place.

The Deputy also mentioned the issue of evictions. It is a huge issue. As Mr. Collins referenced, we are still in breach of Article 16 of the European Social Charter in relation to our eviction procedures for Travellers. It concerns how evictions take place under the criminal trespass legislation, the criminalisation of nomadism as a cultural practice and the fact that there is no national register of evictions. We do not know how many evictions of Travellers take place every year, aside from the continued interventions that we and other organisations such as Free Legal Advice Centres have to make for families in those situations. As the expert review states, it is most important that we repeal the criminal trespass legislation, put the national register in place and include eviction procedures. There was no protection for Travellers in the second eviction ban. That should be reinstated.

Ms RoseMarie Maughan: I agree with both Ms Kelly and Ms Murtagh in all of the information that they have forwarded to members of the committee. The reality for us is that there has been a lack of accountability for decades. The only way that we are going to ensure that there is accountability for Traveller children in Ireland is to ensure that we do not make the same mistakes. We must ensure, as Traveller organisations, Senators, local councillors and Deputies, that we do not feed into the same system that has failed Travellers, generation after generation. I believe and feel that there is a change in the tide in that more people in Ireland and within the political system are saying that it is unacceptable. We need to be vocal. However, just being vocal is not good enough. We need to see action.

In this case, Traveller children need to see accountability. The only way they are going to have that accountability and are no longer going to have their human rights violated is to see the establishment of a national Traveller accommodation authority to oversee the implementation of the 32 recommendations of the expert group report. Funds for that must also be ring-fenced so that the group can set out to complete the task at hand. If it is not fully resourced, it will not be able to implement the 32 recommendations.

I wholeheartedly agree that local authorities that continue to fail to deliver Traveller accommodation plan after Traveller accommodation plan deserve to be sanctioned. They deserved to be sanctioned a long time ago because Travellers have been suffering the trauma of their failures. We need to end that. I and the Irish Traveller movement believe that there would be no need for sanctions if the national Traveller accommodation authority was in place and invested in sufficiently, because local authorities would be held to account and would implement their Traveller accommodation programmes. If there was a robust review system within the Traveller accommodation programmes whereby there was a midterm review of each programme with timelines, targets and outputs, it would be easily monitored and the failure of local authorities would be caught in time. Traveller children need that level of accountability.

As Mr. Collins said, members of this committee and the representatives of Traveller organisations present here today are once more saying the same thing that we have been saying for 30 years. We need to be listened to, finally. We need other players to join us in our quest for equality. If every local Traveller organisation contacted the Ombudsman for Children's office, there would be a similar result for each county in Ireland. That is a scandalous shame for a country of our status in 2021. We have to let Traveller children know that they matter.

Ms Maria Joyce: I wish to echo the points made earlier around congratulations. It is fan-

tastic in one way to be sitting here with a Traveller chairing this committee. It is historic and the more it happens across other committees, the better. Well done, Chairman, you are playing a blinder.

It is unfortunate that we are before this committee again saying exactly the same things we have been saying for decades. Implementation and action are needed. As has already been said, it was not today or yesterday when we learned of these issues or became aware of them. For too long the State has known its failure in the context of Travellers and accommodation.

I am pleased the issue of the burden of racism was raised because the inaction and lack of implementation are underpinned by institutional racism. This problem has utterly failed Travellers living in inhumane conditions.

The report of the Ombudsman for Children is damning. It sets out starkly the conditions in which Traveller children and their parents are living in this country. However, it is not the first report on Spring Lane. In January 2019, a Council of Europe committee upheld a collective complaint about Spring Lane that outlined the conditions that the families, including children, are living in there. That was two and a half years ago. Absolutely nothing has happened in the interim apart from conditions getting worse. Unfortunately, as has already been said, this is the experience of thousands of Travellers living in other substandard and appalling conditions in Traveller-specific accommodation.

We need to remind ourselves that poor and substandard accommodation has a major impact on all aspects of our lives, including health and education. We are already looking at acute disadvantage in education for Traveller children and they experience inequality in terms of access, participation and outcomes. Accommodation has a major bearing on this, as is clear from the testimony of children in the report of the ombudsman. The children are on the back foot from the get-go in walking out to school from where they live covered in mud. The impact on children is similar across the board. It is right that noise is being made. It is right that there is criticism of the conditions and what people have to live with in Spring Lane. What is more important is the action that is needed to follow through from that. Unfortunately, we have not seen that despite the same kinds of issues being flagged time and again. Let us hope for the families in Spring Lane and the thousands of Travellers living in these conditions elsewhere not only that noise is made but that it has an impact on the lived lives of people and Travellers living in these conditions throughout the country.

All this means there has to be action by the State. It has already been spoken about but Part 8 needs to be suspended. It is a significant barrier. We are already seeing it in courts at the moment in respect of one area in the country. The problem is the threat of the mechanism, how it is used and the way in which elected officials act. They are part of local authority accommodation consultative committees and are supposedly working in partnership with Travellers throughout the country to address accommodation issues. On the one hand we say let the plan for the Traveller accommodation programme go through but on the other hand we know it will not get past Part 8. That is no way for what is supposed to be a partnership approach to work. There is abject failure by local authorities with regard to Traveller accommodation.

The removal of trespass legislation from the Statute Book is essential given the impact it has had on Traveller nomadism. In conjunction with that we need an absolute moratorium on convictions in the context of Traveller needs. That can only happen if the State takes the current situation as it is in the context of decades of failure in addressing Traveller accommodation. We should not be sitting before this committee again and, unfortunately, it is frustrating to think that

we probably will be sitting before the committee again naming the same issues we have named many times because the State and local authorities have failed to act in a way that will deliver for Travellers with regard to accommodation.

Chairman: Mr. Collins, do you wish to come in briefly? There are several Deputies and Senators who wish to comment.

Mr. Martin Collins: I will be brief because I need to be somewhere by 2 p.m. - my apologies for that. I will make three quick points in respect of Spring Lane and the shocking images and findings of the report of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children. I wish to cast the minds of people back. We were here before in October 2015 with the terrible tragedy in Carrickmines, where ten members of our community lost their lives. I remember in the aftermath of that terrible tragedy politicians and others came out with rhetoric to the effect that it represented a line in the sand and a watershed moment in terms of relations between Travellers and settled people and accommodation provision. Of course, within a week, as my colleagues and others have said, we went from lip service to baubles. We did not see any change or any significant change coming about as a result of that terrible tragedy. Going back to a point made earlier on, I maintain that the State was complicit in that tragedy because families were left in squalor and deprivation with no services, facilities or water hoses, etc.

After that terrible tragedy the Department of Health and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage embarked on a programme of giving some Travellers on sites a carbon monoxide alarm, a fire alarm and a little hose or a fire blanket here or there. They were giving these gadgets to people on sites that were structurally unsafe to live in. The sites needed to be demolished and reconstructed, but that did not happen. We got little gadgets to put in the trailers. It was absurd and beyond ridiculous.

The last point is not only relevant for Spring Lane but I will use the site as an example. I will ask a question about the chief executive of Cork City Council. Was that person ever at the Spring Lane site? We have 30-odd chief executives throughout the country. How many of them have been on sites to look at the conditions that people have to endure on a daily basis? I suspect the answer is few, if any, have actually been on a site. As a result, they are completely distant and desensitised. They are living in ivory towers. What about the staff in the accommodation units? Few of them go on to sites to meet Travellers. Travellers have to go into their buildings to make the case for accommodation. These people need to get out of their ivory towers, come on to sites and see the reality.

Chairman: I agree 100% with everything that has been said. I will provide a note of information for people. In our next public meeting, we will have the Ombudsman for Children in to discuss the report. That will be a tough report for us to listen to. As Mr. Collins said, it is the case even today even for those reared in other halting sites. It is no different for Travellers in the likes of Labre Park and Cabra Park and so on and for children in those places. My thanks to Mr. Collins for that.

Perhaps we could move a little. We will hear from Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív, Deputy Joan Collins and then Senator Moynihan. Thank you again, Mr. Collins.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: We could fill the convention centre, which is a big place, with reports and we have legislation but it is not being enforced. One of the things that we see now is that it is easy enough to get people to back legislation but it is not as easy to get them to make sure it is implemented.

As has been well outlined here today, the simple fact is that permanent, transient or Traveller-specific housing is not being provided. What I find fascinating when people do not want things is that they never oppose the thing in principle. They always say that the site is not suitable, that it is not the appropriate time or something else is not appropriate and that it is really for the good of the people that they are opposing whatever they are opposing. The reality is that there is no worthwhile accommodation being provided for Travellers, certainly in the city of Galway, although the county is better, and any time one tries to get a Part 8 it seems to run into the sand. As has been pointed out, the CEOs do not overrule the councils. The CEOs have emergency powers to do so but are just not doing so. Not only are the councils not fulfilling their duty, they are thumbing their nose at the Oireachtas, at the law and at their moral obligations, as are the CEOs, effectively, by not swiftly overruling when there is inaction.

As a politician, as a democrat and as somebody who believes in the democratic process, I believe in accountability. I am normally very opposed to taking powers away from politicians and giving them to unelected bodies because it undermines democracy but in this case it is the politicians who have undermined democracy as they have not fulfilled their duties, legally or practically. It is time for us when we come to write our report to be very forceful about what we want. Not forceful in words by saying this and that should happen, but we must propose firm action that will make things happen and ensure things happen. Whether that is the Housing Agency, An Bord Pleanála or whatever mechanism one might look at, it has to happen and happen immediately.

The issue of antisocial behaviour has been brought up. I am fed up telling people that antisocial behaviour in many places has nothing to do with Travellers. Antisocial behaviour occurs in society. What we know also, and what everybody who has an sociological understanding knows, is the more people have a stake in society and the better people are treated then the more likely they are to conform to the norms of society. That is a well known catch-22 that has been well articulated by Mícheál Mac Gréil in the latest version of his books on prejudice, which had a chapter dedicated to the Traveller community. Chapter 13 of the book is entitled, The Travelling People - Ireland's Apartheid. He was bang on the button. The answer to that problem also, funnily enough, is that the settled society must start acting and fulfilling its obligation so that as everybody truly feels equal then everybody will truly feel they have a stake in society. We know that is a reality right across the world.

I hate it when somebody says we must depoliticise this issue. We actually must politicise this issue because if we depoliticise things then what generally happens is that people slap each other on the back and congratulate themselves for being great people and that there is no racism in Irish society. My worry is that we are becoming much more openly intolerant than we were not only in terms of Travellers but other minorities. I worry that it has become acceptable in places for people to stand up and be quite intolerant about things.

This should become a political issue and particularly at election time. If all the Travellers voted in Galway, where people would support their rights, many people would be queuing to change their mind because there is a sizeable vote in it. One might think that a block of 500 or 1,000 votes is small but anybody who has ever fought a proportional representation or PR election knows that it is awfully easy to be hanging in there on the last day not waiting for a 1,000 votes but waiting for 500, 300, 200 or 20 votes. It is time that the Traveller community became much more politicised and judged us all on our actions not on promises made before elections.

I have a little saying in Galway that if somebody presented a petition at an election time looking for a bridge to be built from Connemara to America, even though that will never hap-

pen, people would sign up for it. What I am saying is that people must be measured by their actual actions on this issue. I look forward to us sitting down over the next month and a bit to put together a strong but forceful programme of work that will have things that will be unpalatable for some politicians. That will be a political issue, as it should be. Then we should push our case that the Oireachtas would enact strong legislation and make something happen to deal with the absolutely disgraceful accommodation that we have all over the place.

As I said earlier at another meeting, non-compliance with the law frightens me as well as how local authorities and other agencies connive in not following the law. There seems to be no comeback. A law where there is no penalty is not a law. A law that says a local authority should do something yet there is no comeback when it does not is not a law but a wish. The idea of a law is that there is something one must do and provide but if one does not do so, then there is a penalty. We pass too many laws in this place that wish a lot of things but do not seem to have any penalty at the end of the day if the people who are obliged to do something do not do it. We need teeth in this.

I do not need much detail because I know there are other speakers, including Deputy Collins, who want to get in. Perhaps the witnesses can answer the Deputy's and my questions together, if the Chair agrees, to maximise the time.

Deputy Joan Collins: I agree.

Chairman: Yes, that is great.

Deputy Joan Collins: It is great to see the witnesses again. I know where they are coming from when they say that they should not be here and we should not be in this situation. One can really hear the frustration and righteous anger felt by the Traveller and Roma communities at the way human rights have not been upheld.

We must ensure that the independent national Traveller accommodation authority is set up. We must ensure that it conducts quarterly reviews or whatever and plans exactly what needs to be done. This is the only area where we are not calling for money to be invested as the money is there but it has not been spent because of racist attitudes, which are wrong. We must call that out and align a few things together. I agree with the call to repeal criminal trespass legislation but it must be done in tandem with accommodation being built. I suggest that so we will not have a situation where accommodation is not being built, the law is repealed and families go on to the sites but the law is used against families and communities as the sites are not secured for living conditions. All of these things must be done together so that when people find themselves in an overcrowded situation on a site, there is somewhere for them to go. This comes down to all the issues that relate to evictions both within the Traveller community and general population. No one should be evicted until there is somewhere for him or her to go and if there is a problem, then that must be addressed on the site or wherever.

That is my opinion on the matter. We need to get it right this time because if we do not, there will be not just righteous anger but also anger that will be spread elsewhere in regard to how the communities have been treated. One issue we have to factor in, and it will not stop us from doing the job we have to do, relates to the racist, fascist-type movements that are building in communities and trying to get a foothold in working-class communities. Accommodation is a human right for everybody and we should not all be fighting for the crumbs from the table. Social housing should be provided for the general population and there should be specific accommodation for the Traveller and Roma communities.

I hope that what we in the committee can pull together will enhance what our guests want to do. The legislation has to be there and there will have to be penalties and so on. The issue is so frustrating. The Chairman mentioned Labre Park, the site of which the council was supposed to reconstruct four years ago. Again and again, however, barriers are put up and there is another excuse not to go ahead with it. Inspections are carried out, health and safety reports are prepared and so on. We get new plans all the time and it just kicks the can down the road from the point of view of dealing with the issue on the site.

I read recently that it was ten years ago that Cork City Council presented councillors with a proposal to rezone the land in Spring Lane to extend the chronically overcrowded halting site. A HSE report on the conditions on the site, in regard to the sewerage and so on, was produced in 2012. This has been going on and on. We have to say "stop". It is time for action and we have to implement it. We have to find a way to cut across not only the racism that exists but also the undercurrent that is there. I do not know exactly how we can do that. I do not know whether there should be ad campaigns depicting the conditions the Travelling community is living in. Our guests and their movements have to make that decision because, as they have always said, there should be nothing about them without them.

How can we communicate to the general population that this needs to change and that it is just not acceptable? We cannot accept that kids live in the conditions they do, not because of what they do themselves but because of the non-action of State bodies. I hope we can pull together something strong from this committee to support the communities in every way we can.

Chairman: I agree 100%.

Ms Bridget Kelly: I thank Deputies Ó Cuív and Collins for the points they made in respect of Traveller accommodation. To follow on from what Deputy Ó Cuív said, there has been report after report and much research has been carried out in regard to Traveller accommodation. The Traveller community is one of the most over-analysed and researched communities in the context of accommodation. As Deputy Ó Cuív noted, there is no point in producing these reports and research if we are not going to see action. I acknowledge that the report on Spring Lane has just been released, as was mentioned, but unfortunately this is just one example of what is happening throughout the country. We have seen it at first hand, as Traveller representatives. We have been on the ground and seen the conditions that families are living in. This needs to be addressed because it is having a detrimental impact on the community, both mentally and as a breach of human rights, as I said earlier.

Deputy Ó Cuív raised the issue of legislation and made a good point when he asked what the point of having legislation is if there is no accountability or sanctions. It is not worth the paper it is written on. The other representatives before the committee and I believe the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 needs to be strengthened such that all local authorities that do not meet their legal obligations in regard to the delivery of Traveller accommodation plans need to be held to account and sanctions put in place. Our community on the ground is sick to the teeth of being left behind when it comes to accommodation.

Deputy Ó Cuív mentioned the issue of voting. More Travellers need to vote and great work has been done, both locally and nationally, to encourage our community to vote, which is key. Our community has been let down so often by local authorities. They are disheartened and powerless and they ask what the point in voting is because it will not make any change. We need to see change from the Government in regard to improving the dire living conditions for members of our community. Implementation is the key and we need to see action.

Ms Emily Murtagh: Deputy Ó Cuív spoke about the implementation, and I echo his comments in regard to the chief executives using their emergency powers. That is an important point and it was one recommendation of the expert review, as was circumventing the Part 8 process. Another piece in that puzzle of national accountability relates to ensuring that Traveller-specific accommodation will be included in the Land Development Agency Bill 2021. Amendments have been put forward to ensure that land designated for Traveller-specific culturally appropriate accommodation will be included in that Bill. It is so important that those amendments pass. It raises the question of why those provisions were not included in the original text of the Bill and why Traveller organisations and allies have to work so hard to have them included.

The issue of funding was raised. It is true that there is a budget for Traveller-specific accommodation to be built every year, which last year amounted to €14.5 million. Nevertheless, there also needs to be resourcing for the expert review. In the context of the programme board that has been put in place, there are project groups, extensive consultation processes are ongoing and the Traveller accommodation support unit is carrying out vital work. We need to ensure that board is fully resourced in order that it will work and the recommendations can be effected within the timelines, given that 2020 was lost in terms of those recommendations because of the delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Ms RoseMarie Maughan: I thank Deputies Ó Cuív and Collins for their expressions of solidarity. I know from their work that they are not just expressions and they are committed to promoting Traveller rights and the implementation of the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998. I return to something Mr. Collins raised, namely, the Carrickmines tragedy, when we needlessly lost ten people and an unborn baby due to State failures having left them in inhumane, unsafe conditions. The reality for Travellers today is that it remains a possibility that such a tragedy could happen again, but we must ensure that it never does. The only way in which we can do that is through accountability, and that theme is coming across strongly from all Travellers at this meeting. We need members' support to ensure there will be accountability and our lives will be valid and equal to theirs. It should no longer be acceptable within Irish society, our homeland, for us to be expected to live in inhumane conditions that endanger our lives.

Our statistics speak for themselves. As Ms Kelly noted, we are the most heavily researched and analysed community in the country. We do not need more research or empty promises. We need action. We need true, active allies by our side, morning, noon and night, even when we are not in the room, otherwise nothing will change and, as Ms Joyce said, we will be back here again with broken hearts and children still living in inhumane conditions, saying the same thing that other Travellers who are now dead, God rest them, said 30 years ago. We cannot continue like this. Irish society has to value us as the humans and equal Irish citizens that we are.

Deputy Ó Cuív alluded to Part 8. I wholeheartedly commend him on his work in acknowledging that Part 8 should be bypassed for Travellers. It is a stain on the nation when local authorities can be heard to say that they will let it go through Part 8 because they know it will never pass. Behind that, young Traveller children are left in inhumane conditions. That has to end.

I agree with Deputy Joan Collins that we need to repeal the trespassing legislation alongside the implementation of Traveller-specific accommodation. We focused on inhumane conditions today and did not focus enough on what has happened to Travellers. As a nomadic people, we cannot travel. Instead, we are punished and criminalised for being nomadic people. That has resulted in a cultural genocide by our State. That must be acknowledged and reversed. The rec-

ognition of Traveller ethnicity on 1 March 2017 has to mean something for Traveller children and every Traveller who has lost a key part of their culture and identity. Ireland has to say that enough is enough. We cannot be expected to be resilient for all our lives and never see a day of equality. I want to be equal before I die, like all other Travellers here today, and the committee can help to make that happen.

Ms Maria Joyce: I will be brief because I know some members have committees to go to. I welcome the points made by Deputies Éamon Ó Cuív and Joan Collins about proposing firm action from this committee. Action is needed. There is a link to the Oireachtas and a need for legislative responses. Deputy Ó Cuív is right that more than one convention centre could be filled with all the strategies and reports on Travellers, all containing damning indictments of the conditions that Travellers are living in, across accommodation, education, health, employment and a number of areas. Today's focus is accommodation. Strategies and plans are not being delivered on, which is the crucial problem, because there is no accountability, sanctions or follow-through when they are not delivered. I welcome Deputy Collins's points about how this has been framed and how Travellers have called for it for decades.

This is about the most basic rights but it is important that it is framed in the context of human rights. People do not have basic services like water, sanitation and toilet provision. It is a violation at the most basic levels when people are living in these conditions and those needs are not being met. The context of rights and that framework is crucial. Either Deputy Ó Cuív or Deputy Collins said that there have been too many excuses for too long now, with the can being kicked down the road. This is too often the reality with Traveller accommodation. It is not good enough to have condemnation and criticism when these reports emerge despite the fact that Travellers and Traveller organisations have long been noting these issues and have met walls blocking progress because there is no political fallout, accountability, or consequences for local authorities and elected officials with regard to the non-delivery of Traveller accommodation.

Action and implementation are critical and are needed. I was speaking to a number of local Traveller organisations in Cork last week. One said that it is an awful indictment of ourselves that we have to say that we welcome this kind of report, but welcome it we did. She also acknowledged the bravery of the Ombudsman in going to the lengths that he did in the report. We need those kinds of clear recommendations and clear action that will lead to consequences for local authorities and the State when there is non-delivery.

There have not been many bright spots in Covid-19, if any at all, but it has shown that where there is a will, there is a way. Where some local authorities acted, they could deliver. It was not nearly enough. As one delegate said earlier, it took Covid to make the most basic provision like water or sanitation available. Things can be made to happen where there is that political will. Covid has shown that things can happen right across Irish society and that lesson needs to be emphasised. That is all that we are asking for. We are not asking for anything magical or new. We are asking for an acceptance of viewing Traveller accommodation from a human rights perspective that responds to the community, its needs, and its ethnicity. While new legislation is important, in the context of recognising Travellers as an ethnic minority, it is also important that we dismantle legislation that is contradictory to the way of life, ethnic status, and the community. That includes the trespassing legislation. I do not want to wait until other things are in place to make that to happen. I want legislation that impacts in a disproportionate and negative way on Travellers to be dismantled in tandem with the conditions being created so that we will not be back here at any time in the future saying the same things over and over again.

Chairman: Unfortunately Senator Moynihan had to go to another meeting and sends her apologies. It has been difficult for me as a member of the Traveller community to chair some of the meetings of this committee because of how sometimes our language is not always appropriate or how we speak about "them" and "us", the normal community and the Traveller community. We see it often and it is no different here in the Houses of the Oireachtas. Ms Maughan is right that there is not 100% of the necessary political will but there has been a shift in the political way of thinking and engaging with members of the Traveller community.

Regarding the suggestion that Travellers do not vote, a majority of the Traveller community vote and have voted for many years. It is up to local authorities to go into halting sites to engage with members of the Traveller community. I hope with all my heart that it does so, as a 31-year-old woman who has worked since the age of 18 years and who has sat on local consultative committees where local authorities speak about us and say we are the problem in society. We are not the problem. We are not looking for special treatment; we are looking for basic human rights.

People in the community are sick of audits being done on sites. Carrickmines is, unfortunately, being used as an excuse for more evictions, for saying caravans have to be 6 m apart and for other nonsense that stops Travellers being able to live with our families and on halting sites. Since Carrickmines, more barriers have been put up around Traveller accommodation. Nothing has got better.

I remember that day in 2015. I thought it had taken ten people to die and this might change stuff for the Traveller community around accommodation. Unfortunately, it has not. At the report last week I cried, as a young woman who grew up in Labre Park. Still today, there is no park for the children to play in or proper facilities for children there. As a woman who grew up in those conditions and now has my own children, I do not want that for Traveller children. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman, the State and the local authorities have a responsibility.

We are nowhere near reaching the sustainable development goals at a European level. Recently, there was an outbreak of hepatitis A. We do not see hepatitis A in Ireland today but it is acceptable to see it in the Traveller community and among Traveller children on halting sites. As a Traveller woman who fought hard to get in here, I hope with all my heart that Ms Maria Joyce, Mr. Collins, Ms Maughan, Mr. Bernard Joyce and other representatives of our community will not be sitting here in a few years blue in the face having these discussions again.

There is policy after policy, legislation after legislation and no implementation. We have the answers. Travellers came up with the answers. All we are looking for is implementation. I know people on this committee and I have worked closely with them. I hope the committee will achieve these actions for our community as a whole so we do not see any more tragedies like Carrickmines or horrible but welcome reports from the Government, the State and local authorities. It may be sexy to vote for the councillor who does not like Travellers and says they will push out the Travellers. It is up to us to hold councillors to account and say we do not accept racism in Ireland today. Nothing about us without us. Travellers are Ireland's own and we have always belonged in Ireland.

Notwithstanding the Proclamation, young children in Ireland are still growing up in dire circumstances and we are not treating Traveller children as equal. It seems that all the children of our nation should be treated equally, but not Traveller children. We need to look at that. As a committee, we have a responsibility. I know members of this committee are fully commit-

ted to making sure we have action this time around. Let us not recreate the wheel. Those 32 recommendations are already there. The work has already been done. The easy part should be implementation, drawing down the money and making sure people will not have to put up with horrible living conditions and be blamed for it.

I am conscious that I am the Chairperson of the committee and I do not want to go on and on, but all that needs to be done is implementation. The work is already done.

I see Senator Joe O'Reilly has come in. If he would like to make a comment, he is welcome to do so. Then the witnesses are welcome to come in with a final point.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I thank the Chair for offering me the opportunity. I was travelling and off the air so I am not clued in to what has been said. I will just stay listening and speak if something arises before we finish. There is no point in my commenting on what I have not heard. Sorry about that.

Chairman: Would any of the witnesses like to give any last comments or remarks? Mr. Collins is not here but the other witnesses are welcome to speak.

Ms Maria Joyce: Much has been said here this morning and in many other places about the conditions Traveller children, parents, men and women live in. The conditions of the children in Spring Lane which were spoken about in terms of their lived experience are similarly substandard to those of many Traveller children across the country. If those shoes were being walked in by the majority population that are walked in by Traveller children and Travellers, the failure by this State would not have held the way it has in the context of Traveller accommodation through the decades. That is the sad reality.

We can keep talking but what is needed now is action. The stories those children told are those that every Traveller child in substandard accommodation and homelessness could tell. If that was experienced by the people who can make a difference and make the delivery happen, it would not have gone on and the State would not have continued to fail Traveller children. There is an onus on the report coming from this committee to reinforce those points, which I think it will, with regard to implementation and action.

Ms Bridget Kelly: Following on from what Ms Joyce said, it is unacceptable in 2021 that we still have families in deplorable conditions. It is important based on today's conversation that we see clear targets, timelines, implementation and action at Government and Department level to ensure improvements to Traveller living conditions across the country. Implementation and action are key. We do not need any more false promises.

Ms RoseMarie Maughan: I agree with Ms Joyce and Ms Kelly. I thank the committee and the Chair for the opportunity. I am hopeful from today's session, hearing the commitment of the Chair and other members, that it is time for real action, which means accountability and implementation. A key priority that came across today was the need for a national Traveller accommodation authority, which would ensure that the 32 recommendations needed to save Traveller lives are implemented and that our culturally appropriate accommodation needs are met. It is no longer good enough to develop policy after policy following decades of forced assimilation attempts. As the Chair stated, Travellers have come with the answers. We have been coming with the answers and solutions for decades but have not had the opportunity to be listened to equally. I hope I am hearing that we are being listened to today and have allies who are willing to push our agenda with us, not for us.

I also remind people about the bypassing of Part 8, an issue which came across strongly today. It is meant to be an element of the State that serves the purpose of democracy but, unfortunately, for Travellers there is no democracy when Traveller-specific accommodation is being blocked decade after decade, and poor Traveller children and families are forced to live without the basics such as water.

I ask for the repeal of the trespass Act, which criminalises travellers for being themselves and for being born into an ethnic minority group. As I mentioned, this Act has resulted in cultural genocide. On the one hand, we are evicted from pillar to post for trying to be ourselves and for being nomadic, while, on the other, local authorities and the State fail to provide transient sites. Instead of investing resources into delivery of transient accommodation, they invest our resources into evictions of vulnerable families. That is not the way a country that prides itself on human rights acts and behaves in a just society.

To sum up, we have to be the generation that ends Traveller oppression and acknowledges 11% of our deaths by suicide are due to institutional racism and the way we have been treated. That is the impact of our lived trauma and not being treated as the equals we are. I look forward to working with the committee to ensure the human rights of Traveller children are no longer breached.

Chairman: I thank Ms Maughan. On behalf of the committee, I thank each and every one of our witnesses. I thank each organisation for taking the opportunity to present to the committee. Again, it is tough sometimes to hear the hard truth but I hope with all my heart there will be some action. I again thank everyone on behalf of the committee and ask them to stay safe. My note states that I hope the witnesses will be able to again join us in person, but I hope they will not have to join us in person to speak on accommodation again and that we will make the implementations we are required to. As has been said, these are basic human rights.

Our meeting is concluded. Our next meeting will be with the Ombudsman who will give a presentation on the No End in Site report, an investigation into the living conditions for children on local authority halting sites. We look forward to that.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.24 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 15 June 2021.