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, 1 Iúil 2021

Thursday, 1 July 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,	
Dessie Ellis,	
Paul McAuliffe,	
Denise Mitchell,	
Éamon Ó Cuív,	
Bríd Smith.	

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

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Everybody is very welcome. Apologies have been received from Deputy Stanton. Before we hear from the witnesses, we have to attend to some committee business. I remind members that they must be in the Leinster House campus, or in the convention centre in Dublin, to attend the meeting. If any member attempts to participate from outside of Leinster House, I will ask them to leave the meeting. I remind witnesses that because they are giving evidence from outside of Leinster House, they may not have the same privilege as if they were in Leinster House. They may think it is appropriate to take legal advice on this matter. They are again reminded that they should not criticise or make charges against any person, or damage the good name of any person. They must stop if I say that I think they are breaking the rules.

Although the minutes of the previous meeting on 15 June were already approved in the virtual meeting, we must do this for procedural reasons. Are the minutes agreed? Agreed.

Before we hear from the witnesses, I propose that we publish their opening statements on the committee website. The opening statements are from Focus Ireland and the Housing Agency. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Traveller Accommodation: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: This is our third public meeting on Traveller accommodation. On behalf of the committee, I am delighted to extend a warm welcome to our witnesses today. Representing Focus Ireland, we have Ms Rosemary Hennigan, policy co-ordinator and Mr. Mike Allen, director of advocacy; representing the Housing Agency we have Mr. John O'Connor, CEO, and Ms Roslyn Molloy, researcher. I suggest that the witnesses take five to ten minutes for their opening statement and then we will open up the floor to members, who will also have five to ten minutes. I invite Ms Hennigan to make her opening statement.

Ms Rosemary Hennigan: Focus Ireland welcomes this opportunity to present to the committee. Focus Ireland has been a leading national NGO working with homeless families for more than 30 years, and, in the course of our work supporting those experiencing homelessness, we regularly work with households from the Traveller community, who are disproportionately represented in homeless services.

While homelessness is an incredibly difficult experience for anyone, there is no doubt that being from the Traveller community makes the experience of homelessness more challenging again. Focus Ireland caseworkers report that there is greater complexity of need when a household is from the Traveller community, reflecting the broad and multilayered pattern of social exclusion in society. There is a sizable gap between Travellers' housing and cultural needs and the availability of appropriate accommodation for this group, and this gap has been there for many years. While many of the problems we see through our front-line casework are also experienced by households not from the Traveller community, the multiple layers of marginalisation Traveller households face place them at particular risk, first, of an experience of homelessness and, second, difficulties accessing homeless services and later exiting homelessness.

In particular, we highlight a number of issues to committee members, the first of which is the absence of data specifically recording the housing challenges facing Traveller households. Traveller organisations have, over the years, called for an ethnic identifier to be used, which

would allow us to better understand the causes of homelessness for Traveller households, as well as their experience within homeless services. We know that Traveller households are over-represented in homelessness but we do not know, month to month, how many people recorded as homeless in the monthly figures published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage are from the Traveller community. We also, currently, have no means of measuring the extent of hidden homelessness in Ireland, including the number of people couch-surfing, in overcrowded accommodation, or experiencing housing scarcity of one form or another. The Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2020, published by the Housing Agency, shows that 1,104 Travellers on the housing list registered a specific accommodation need, but we do not know how many Travellers on the general social housing list did not register a specific accommodation need, or how many people have a housing need but are not currently on the housing list. The expert review group report on Traveller accommodation, published in July 2019, included a call for a nationwide survey of the housing needs of the Traveller population to fully understand mobility patterns, family formation, existing accommodation tenure and conditions, and future accommodation preferences. We hope that this research will be undertaken urgently.

The second issue relates to problems with the private rental sector as the primary exit mechanism from homelessness for this group. The vast majority of exits from homelessness currently are into the private rental sector, rather than to local authority or approved housing body, AHB, social housing. Figures relating to quarter 1 of 2021 show that 82% of exits from homelessness were via the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme. While HAP has prevented many people entering homelessness, as well as allowing thousands of households to exit emergency accommodation into the private rental sector, these tenancies are not a substitute for permanent, stable social housing. It is particularly challenging for marginalised households with complex needs to find and maintain HAP tenancies in the absence of supports and interventions. It is also a challenge to find rental units suitable for single adults or larger households, with many of these households becoming trapped in emergency accommodation for long periods as a result. The private rental sector can be a hostile place for marginalised groups, or households with high needs, who are competing with the general population for limited rental stock, facing potential evictions, rising rents, and discrimination. A report from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, published in 2018, found Travellers to be 22 times more likely than any other group to be discriminated against in the private rental sector. If a HAP tenancy cannot be sourced, Traveller households can become trapped in emergency accommodation or left with no option but to return to overcrowded, substandard accommodation with family or in unserviced and sometimes uninhabitable sites.

The third issue is the need to match social housing stock to family size. Acquisitions and leasing of existing units for social housing tend to be two- or three-bed units, as far more of this unit type are currently available on the property market. Local authorities report that accommodation for single adults and larger families is more difficult to source in existing stock; it is therefore hugely important that new build social housing matches the needs of those on the housing list.

Data from census 2016 show that Traveller households tend to be bigger than the general population, with more than one in four Irish Traveller households having six or more persons compared with less than one in 20 households in the State overall. One of the main pathways into homelessness reported to Focus Ireland is overcrowding in accommodation or an untenable situation where a household was living in an unserviced site and cannot remain there on health and safety grounds. This is reflected in available data, which show that Traveller households are much more likely to experience overcrowding. Nearly 39% of Traveller households had

more persons than rooms compared with less than 6% of all households in the general population. The under-provision of Traveller-specific accommodation exacerbates such situations, as does the continuing prevalence of unaffordable rents and the lack of available or appropriate social housing. While Traveller-specific accommodation must be progressed urgently by local authorities, Focus Ireland also believes that new build general social housing should be provided to match the family size of those larger households on the housing list.

The fourth issue is the framing of legislation and policy to facilitate cultural identity. The legislative framework for access to housing and homelessness is based on a geographic link to a particular local authority. Eligibility for social housing is based on a connection to the local authority area and each local authority holds a distinct housing list. Once a person is added to a housing list with a particular local authority, it can be difficult to transfer to another. If a household becomes homeless and has an urgent accommodation need in a local authority area where a local connection cannot be demonstrated, the household may be refused emergency accommodation. If a household needs to move area for any reason, it may struggle to transfer to another local authority housing list and it risks losing its place on the original housing list. The fact that homelessness and housing is devolved to local authorities can lead to gaps and blockages in accessing services, differing income limits in different local authority areas, differing HAP rates and other problems. This is an experience common to all households facing homelessness, but the effect can produce particular hardships for the Traveller community, due to the distinct cultural identity and nomadic tradition of this community. A rights-based approach would allow for greater flexibility on geographic placement and transfers between housing lists.

The fifth and final issue is the need for additional supports to assist Traveller households to find appropriate accommodation. In the experience of Focus Ireland caseworkers, Traveller households presenting as homeless tend to have more complex needs, more complicated cases, and a higher support need when in emergency accommodation. The lower school completion rate among Traveller households means that literacy can be an issue, affecting people's ability to engage with the complicated nature of applying for social housing or sourcing a HAP tenancy. This can be hugely distressing and frustrating for people attempting to navigate a bureaucratic system such as the housing list and homeless accommodation. Additional time and support are needed to ensure that those barriers are overcome; however, such support is often not available. Again, this reflects the ongoing structural disadvantages which the Traveller community face and which need to be proactively addressed. Consideration should be given to greater supports in the form of additional case management at local authority level aimed at helping Traveller households to access their rights and, ultimately, to find homes.

Focus Ireland believes that housing and homeless policy must take account of the particular demographics and characteristics of vulnerable and minority groups, including the Traveller community. Our housing system must be designed to allow sufficient flexibility to accommodate and respect the rights and requirements of minority groups and their distinct identities. Laws, policies, circulars, rules and schemes can be indirectly discriminatory if they fail to consider and properly address the disparate impacts which a particular law or requirement has on a minority group. All public sector agencies are required under the public sector duty to consider the human rights and equality impacts on statutorily protected groups, which includes the Traveller community. In the area of housing and homelessness, Focus Ireland would welcome greater engagement from statutory agencies and public bodies with the public sector duty. We would also welcome a rights-based and culturally-sensitive approach to the assessment and allocation of housing and housing supports for Traveller households.

We very much welcome the committee's invitation to meet today and are happy to take any questions the members may have.

Chairman: Thank you. I call Mr. O'Connor from the Housing Agency.

Mr. John O'Connor: We are pleased to be here today to discuss these issues with the committee. I am accompanied by my colleague, Roslyn Molloy, head of policy and practice. In the interests of time, can we take my statement as read and I will make some high-level comments?

Chairman: That is fine.

Mr. John O'Connor: We welcome this opportunity to discuss the issue of access to housing and accommodation for the Traveller community. As mentioned by Rosemary Hennigan, the Housing Agency publishes the summary of social housing assessments annually. In 2020, there were just over 1,000 households with unmet Traveller-specific accommodation requirements. In addition, there are more Traveller families on the general social housing lists that are not specifically identified.

In regard to the matter of homelessness, as the committee is aware and has been highlighted, there is a significantly higher rate of homelessness among Travellers compared to the settled population. Data provided by Dublin City Council to the Traveller expert group shows there were 504 homeless Travellers in temporary accommodation in Dublin in October 2018. That figure included 100 families with children. This represented approximately 9% of the total number of homeless families in Dublin at that date, even though Travellers make up less than 1% of the population nationally.

The Housing Agency has undertaken quite an amount of research in regard to Traveller accommodation issues and we typically would do at least one piece of research each year in that area. Some of the research work has included the experience of Travellers in the private rental sector, a review of the funding for Traveller-specific accommodation, the implementation of the Traveller accommodation programme in 2017 and why Travellers leave Traveller-specific accommodation. We, and Roslyn Molloy specifically, provided support to the Traveller expert group and that report was issued in 2019.

We provide technical expertise and support to Traveller accommodation projects. Some of the projects we have been involved in include a current project in Monaghan and we supported Kerry County Council and Cork City Council in respect of some of their Traveller-specific projects. We have also worked with the Traveller-led housing association, Cena. We are currently supporting the role of the project development officer with Cena for a three-year period. Basically, we employ someone who we assign to support its work.

I will now move to a couple of the points in our statement that are for particular consideration. First, we suggest that the recommendations in the 2019 Traveller accommodation expert group report are progressed and we welcome the establishment by the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, of a programme board last year to implement those recommendation positions. Second, we welcome the announcement by the Minister of State that a revision is to be made to the social housing assessments to collect more accurate data and to include an ethnic identifier as part of that, as recommended by the expert group. We fully support its introduction. Third, updated guidelines on the planning, design, management and maintenance of Traveller-specific accommodation would aid the work of local authorities and approved housing bodies. We believe these guidelines should be issued as soon as possible. Fourth, we believe the approved

housing bodies have a key role to play in the delivery of Traveller-specific accommodation and we would welcome further investigation of what supports could be provided to ensure greater involvement of the sector in this area. A great deal of current social housing delivery is coming through the approved housing bodies and we would like to see more of that being provided for the Traveller community.

The overall aim for our society is the availability of homes for all. To achieve this goal, all sections of society must be included. The Housing Agency made a submission to this committee in February 2021 on key issues affecting the Traveller community and that outlines in more detail some of the points raised in our statement. We are happy to discuss these points and provide more information to the committee, as it sees fit.

Chairman: Thank you. I want to open the conversation to committee members. I call Deputy Ó Cuív.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: There are two issues that arise in the context of housing. One concerns those who want specific Traveller accommodation and, then, there are many people who want accommodation and will take whatever is going. What we obviously do not know is how many would opt for specific accommodation, if it was available, and how many would opt for standard housing. Would Mr. O'Connor accept that the number of people in homelessness from the Traveller community is a fair indication of the crisis in regard to Travellers getting accommodation, whether it is HAP accommodation, local authority accommodation, Traveller-specific accommodation or other accommodation? Would he accept that is a fair measure of the challenge?

I understand that 50% of the people who are homeless in Galway city, not the county, are from the Travelling community. It certainly would be my personal experience, from dealing with them every week in the most pitiful of situations, that this is true. These are people who cannot get HAP properties because of prejudice and there is also the big issue of the top-ups. If people are on basic social welfare, the HAP limits are totally ridiculous in the context of rents in Galway city. Even if people could get properties there, the rent is so outrageous that they cannot afford the top-up. That means HAP accommodation is a much more expensive proposition than, for example, local authority housing or voluntary association housing. Would the witnesses agree that what we are seeing in the official figures is just the tip of the iceberg?

Ms Rosemary Hennigan: That is absolutely right, unfortunately. That is why we have been trying to emphasise the importance of the data, so we can fully understand it. It is definitely the tip of the iceberg. Emergency accommodation should be a last safety net for somebody who finds himself or herself temporarily without a home for some reason, but at present it has become something of a default for this community. That is based, in part, on the failures of the HAP and the inaccessibility of the private rental sector, all of which illustrates the multifaceted nature of discrimination in Ireland against the Traveller community. We see it when it gets to the crisis point when there is nowhere else to go so people apply for emergency accommodation. That is why there is such an over-representation. Housing is the crisis point for this, but it is a much broader social problem that requires very serious attention.

It would be very good to know whether people would opt for Traveller-specific accommodation because, with regard to that provision, we need to know what we should be providing or what other demographics apply in terms of going to this community and providing for it better. At present, we are not doing that. We are hoping they will be able to slip into the existing structures for HAP and, as the Deputy said, there are major problems with the HAP scheme

currently in the context of the rates and the top-ups which are payable alongside the differential rent. All of that is resulting in the individual stories that we hear all the time on the front line from people in completely unacceptable circumstances. The recent report from the Ombudsman for Children demonstrated some of that. Unfortunately, that is an extreme case but it is also not uncommon, as I am sure the committee is aware. It is an absolute crisis. Does Mr. Allen wish to add to that?

Mr. Mike Allen: In one sense, all forms of homelessness are the tip of the iceberg and an expression of the wider problem, so it is absolutely true that this is the case in respect of Travellers. When there is a housing crisis, there are going to be some people who end up experiencing it most. They tend to be the people who were already more marginalised and where there are systemic problems relating to them, whether it be the Traveller population or people with other challenges in their lives. It is important to understand that they are not homeless because of those circumstances. The homelessness happens because of the way we have failed in our housing system, and those people happen to experience the problem because of the issues they face.

It is important to point out that Focus Ireland, in terms of its services, is working mainly with Traveller families who have opted into mainstream housing. We do not have services that work in Traveller-specific accommodation. We do not explore the question of whether they are opting for mainstream housing because that is all that is available or because that is what they prefer. We take people where they are. Finding ways to explore more deeply what people's choices would be if they genuinely had choices would be a crucial part of dealing with the overall housing challenges that face the Traveller community.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I do not wish to hog the meeting, but I have a supplementary question. The people who contact me who are in very bad housing situations are not all Travellers, but a disproportionate number in Galway city are. If they are homeless and one asked them what their hierarchy of choices is, they would ask for a home. It is very simple. They would say: "Get me a home. Do not procrastinate. Do not do any more studies or any more thinking. Get me a home." It is the majority situation. It shows how far behind we are that the question of choice is not even arising for them, because they will tell me to stop faffing about in the vast majority of cases. Some people are quite specific about what they are seeking. Some are specific that they want conventional housing, some want housing in Traveller-specific accommodation and some want halting site accommodation. I get all three, but it is fair to say that a large number who come to me, particularly the people who end up in homelessness, want a home, and they want it fast.

An issue that arises in the modern way we do our business is that we are very logical, but at times logic can give very strange answers. One of the problems I come across all the time is that Travellers, with just cause, will tell me that if they are offered a house in a certain area, there would be problems if they were moved to that area because they are either being taken away from where the family is or they are being put in with families with whom there have been issues in the past and there has been conflict and so forth. We are creating conflict because we just do it. A family is number one, ten, 12, 13, 14, 15 or further down the list. We say to them that they are next on the list and that is where they have to go, but we never take into account the human aspects of putting somebody in the wrong place and creating problems and tensions into the future that could be avoidable because of the close familial relationships that many Traveller families have. I get this all the time when Travellers come to me. The system does not seem to be able to deal with this in an official way. Some of the officials do their best and the social of-

ficers are trying very hard, but there has been no official recognition that it is not just a question of pulling people from the list, saying, "that is the next three-bedroom house and that is where it is", and totally ignoring societal reasons when making that decision. I am interested to hear comments from the witnesses on that issue as well.

Mr. Mike Allen: In general, that applies across all housing allocation. There is an official indifference to, sometimes at a political level, or serious dismissal of the fact that people like to live in particular communities and that their connections to those communities are very important to them in terms of childcare or other forms of care or social connection. Those are often not treated in the system with the seriousness they require. The Deputy is correct that this general problem is much more extreme in respect of Travellers. Certainly, I have come across cases where particular Traveller families have identified certain areas which they could not go into because of other conflicts and issues to do with the past. On one level, these need to be dealt with and should not be accepted as normal in our society but, at the same time, in terms of housing allocation, they have to be respected and understood. In fact, where the allocation is offered by the local authority, it seems almost deliberately to have gone against what the Traveller family has indicated and is impossible for them. Then the family is told that they have turned down a reasonable offer of housing accommodation. At best, there seems to be an indifference to that and, sometimes, in some local authorities, one comes across cases where the decisions that are made seem to be almost perverse. That creates an atmosphere.

There does not appear to be a system at legislative level, regulatory level or practice level of making that a mainstream part of how we respond to housing need. I would welcome if that could be highlighted. I realise it is hard to understand, when there is not enough housing, that the location of the housing is also important. One ends up almost with a beggars cannot be choosers situation, but the argument we make is that housing is a right. It is not a matter of beggars cannot be choosers. It is a right. How do we organise our society whereby we can fulfil that right? The name of Mr. O'Connor's agency is the Housing Agency, but he always reminds us that it is the housing communities agency. It is a reminder that one cannot solve the housing crisis unless one understands and respects the communities people want and need to live in. The Deputy has raised a very important point.

Mr. John O'Connor: I will respond quickly on a few points. One is the homelessness issue. As the Deputy said, the level of homelessness among Travellers is excessively high, and there are serious problems as a result. On the issue of the request for Traveller-specific accommodation or general accommodation, I will ask my colleague, Ms Molloy, to respond. The allocation of housing varies from local authority to local authority and often from official to official. A significant number of local authority officials are aware of what constitutes an appropriate allocation in terms of where people can live and where there are difficulties. The majority of officials do their best. I agree with the Deputy that there are issues with the allocation of housing and ensuring a location is appropriate for a household. Does Ms Molloy want to come in on that issue?

Ms Roslyn Molloy: The Deputy's first point on the type of accommodation, in terms of whether it is Traveller-specific or general standard accommodation, was answered by Ms Hennigan. People will want a roof over their heads, but one of the issues that has been very clear from the reports and review of the expert group is the lack of evidence. The differing parties, whether it is social workers in local authorities versus Travellers and local authority workers, have different ideas on Travellers' preferences.

There is progress and the administrative datasets that are collecting this information will

provide the means to identify those families that identify as Travellers and have a preference for Traveller-specific accommodation as well as those who may have a preference for standard social housing. They can list their preferences. The expert group felt some of the submissions pointed to the fact that in areas where there may be a view that there is no chance of accessing Traveller-specific accommodation, therefore, Travellers will opt to put down as their number one preference standard social housing.

That potentially blurs what people are looking for. We need to clarify that and make application forms much clearer so that local authorities have a standardised way of collecting that information. That would be a big step forward in understanding what needs to be planned into the future.

Deputy Joan Collins: A lot was covered in the replies to Deputy Ó Cuív, such as application forms for the Traveller community and how specific they should be. Do the witnesses have any suggestions as to how they can be made clearer? What would a local authority require? Is legislative change needed to instruct authorities to do that specific work? At the end of the day, if a Traveller family has stated they want Traveller-specific accommodation in their area but a council does not build it, that does not resolve the issue. That is probably the problem.

The Ombudsman's report on Spring Lane stated on the one hand that the local authority said it offered Travellers accommodation and they had refused, while, on the other, the Ombudsman said there were no accurate housing records for the families concerned. No one could say that the Traveller families refused accommodation. The records were not clear or handled properly. That is a specific issue that I would like to get a grasp of. Mr. O'Connor, Ms Hennigan or Ms Molloy can advise the committee regarding local authorities.

Focus Ireland deals specifically with Housing First. Does it have records on how many people from the Traveller community, including individuals, males, females and families, it is dealing with in Housing First? For how long are key workers linked in with Housing First tenants in the process? I have experience of one particular person and I want clarification on how long a key worker links in with people engaged with Housing First, in particular in respect of the Travelling community. How does Focus Ireland link in with other ethnic groups?

Mr. Mike Allen: I will address the point on Housing First. Focus Ireland has run Housing First for over ten years and for a large period of that time we have done so on our own or with the Peter McVerry Trust in Dublin. It went out for a competitive tender a couple of years ago and the Peter McVerry Trust is providing the service in Dublin. I cannot speak directly to how that is operating in Dublin now. We ran Housing First services in many other parts of the country.

It is worth saying that Housing First, as it currently operates, is only directed at single people and not families with children. That is an issue that we have raised. We have identified effective practices in Housing First for people with complex support needs, but there are families and young people who often have complex support needs and whose housing situation would benefit from Housing First. However, the service does not apply to those groups at the moment. Housing First includes single adult members of the Traveller community. I am not aware of any data from the time we have been running the service where such data was disaggregated. That is the point we made in our submission. Part of the issue is that there is a gap and there is also an historic reluctance to collect that information. I am glad that the Traveller organisation has been quite explicit. Sometimes data is collected for discriminatory reasons or to overcome discrimination. One needs to build up a consensus on what the data will be used

for. I welcome the fact that we have reached a consensus on this that we want to collect the data to avoid discrimination and understand barriers. That is good. As far as I am aware, the data for that does not exist in Housing First. The national Housing First office might know about that.

The Housing First support system involves supporting tenants for as long as they continue to need it, which is presumed to be more or less indefinitely. That should apply to members of the Traveller community, as well as anyone from anywhere in the country or anyone of any nationality. The Housing First support continues for as long as a person requires it.

Mr. John O'Connor: I wish to make a further comment on Housing First for clarity. It is aimed at individuals with complex needs. It is not necessarily for all individuals who are in temporary homeless accommodation.

On the application form for social housing, no specific additional legislation is required. It is covered by way of regulation. We now have just one application form nationally. There is a desire and requirement for that so that things do not vary from place to place throughout the country. We chair the housing assessment group and work with local authorities and the Department on modifications to the form. In terms of the Traveller community, the Minister has agreed to add an additional identifier. More information on what is required on the application form to be able to offer support to Travellers has been outlined.

To answer the Deputy's first question, the form can be changed relatively easily. The main thing is to have consistency across the country and not make the application from overly complex in terms of what information is needed. Does Ms Molloy want to add anything?

Ms Roslyn Molloy: I will add to the point I made earlier about application forms. Ethnic identifier is one element. A second, and it is a recommendation in the expert report, is that being able to express first, second and third preferences on accommodation type would, potentially, improve accommodation options. As Mr. O'Connor mentioned, an oversight group is looking at this but there was also a call for monitoring of the data, particularly on Travellers. As this new information starts to be collected, we will be able to work out what the barriers are, and the progress being made, on social housing waiting lists.

Ms Rosemary Hennigan: To answer Deputy Collins and Senator Moynihan on the question of allocations in social housing and the social housing list, and what we said about geographic movement and all of that, the idea of a social housing passport has been mooted for quite a long time. This might better reflect the reality of people's lives. People do not organise their lives around being in a particular local authority area and not moving into another, even though somebody might be there who is part of their support network. A social housing passport might better reflect the reality of how people are living, especially because of the current housing scarcity where someone might need to move around and couch-surf between different family members or whatever else. It has been suggested as part of the programme for Government. As far as I am aware, it has not been progressed to date but it would be positive to look at it again, progress it, ask what the realities of it are and how it can be accomplished and see whether it would benefit, for example, the Traveller community. Again, I do not think a social housing passport would need legislative change but it is part of the programme for Government so it would be interesting to see if it might be progressed.

Chairman: We are waiting for other members to come in. We have seen submissions and heard during previous meetings about trespass legislation and how nomadism has been criminalised in Ireland. Travellers can no longer travel because it is against the law. Apart from

repealing that legislation, what else do the Focus Ireland or the Housing Agency representatives believe could be put in place as a solution as soon as possible? What would that be?

We have discussed housing, social housing and areas that are relevant to the general population. The Traveller community is obviously part of the general population in Ireland. However, so much has been taken away from that community. Some people choose to live in a trailer or caravan because that is their way of life. I have family members who live in trailers and would not live anywhere else. To have the opportunity to do that is part of our culture and way of life. We are always talking about houses and so on but what about lending schemes for caravans? Many Travellers would live in a warm, clean mobile home that was appropriate and had services to go with it. Is that a possible option for Travellers in the context of trespass legislation? When we talk about accommodation, we are always talking about social housing but many Travellers would choose clean, appropriate, warm mobiles homes and trailers.

Ms Roslyn Molloy: I have a couple of points that are relevant to the Chair's comments. The issue of transient halting sites was in the 1998 housing legislation but has not been taken up or progressed. In its submission to the committee, the Housing Agency mentioned looking at good practice and design guidelines for good quality Traveller-specific accommodation, including halting sites. That is something that could help and improve accommodation options for Travellers and support approved housing bodies and local authorities that are working to develop more of this. That is something we see as potentially helping in that area. The Chair mentioned the caravan loan scheme. A pilot scheme is being rolled out in four local authority areas. The caravan loan scheme was reviewed by the Housing Agency a few years ago. We made recommendations on the value of having such a scheme and its benefit to the Traveller community.

Mr. John O'Connor: I will add a point about different types of accommodation. Cork City Council got a lot of criticism in the recent report but it completed one development in recent years at Hollyhill. It is probably due to the commitment of council staff involved in the design of that Traveller-specific accommodation that it is a combination of houses, bays and day accommodation. It gives many options for Traveller accommodation and flexibility for the future. Where there are individuals in local authorities, or others, who are committed to designing good quality accommodation, it works. We had a very negative example from Cork city but Hollyhill is a very positive one. The individuals in the council who worked on that were committed to designing a high-quality development.

Ms Rosemary Hennigan: Focus Ireland has been campaigning for a referendum on the right to housing. That would give us an opportunity to review the legislative framework we have at the moment and the ways in which it could do a much better job of acknowledging, protecting and nurturing Traveller culture. There are opportunities to do that because at the moment the framework can be quite blind and a bit of a one-size-fits-all approach. When we look at the social housing lists, there is an opportunity, as I said, to have a larger unit size but also, within that, to have an element of choice about what those units might be. As the Chair said, it does not all have to be housing by any manner or means. The Housing Agency has addressed that somewhat. The right to housing gives us an opportunity to have a discussion on what that might look like. Housing does not have to mean a house in the traditional sense. It can definitely be an opportunity to have that conversation.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank everyone for being with us here today. It is important to hear their views. I was absent for some of the previous committee meetings because we have been passing the Land Development Agency Bill. There were votes on Report and Final Stages

on that, which were completed last night. My question focuses on that because the Bill and the unlocking of the public land bank for the delivery of houses provides a very unique opportunity to ensure that Traveller-specific accommodation is included in all the developments the Land Development Agency, LDA, will progress. Has there been any discussion between the Housing Finance Agency or approved housing bodies and the LDA, specifically on the issue of Traveller accommodation? I think the Minister last night brought forward amendments to ensure that Traveller accommodation would be included in the provision of housing on these lands. That is really welcome but, like lots of things about the LDA, it now leaves legislation and gets into implementation. That is where I am worried the intention does not transfer into delivery. That is a general question. Has there been any discussion with the LDA or ambitions in order to deliver Traveller-specific accommodation through the public land banks that are opened up?

On a broader point, it is really interesting that the debate on the right to housing came before the housing committee. I think there was unanimous support for it. There is full support within the Fianna Fáil Party for a constitutional amendment on the right to housing. I think the Minister has support now as well with the housing commission. It is a matter of allowing the commission to come up with the wording of the amendment because we have to be very careful not to allow red herrings to defeat what is a very positive proposal. We have seen in other referendums that red herrings often can do that. Let us be honest, you could have people with very racist intentions towards Travellers using the idea of illegal Traveller encampments as a way to fight a horrible battle in a referendum to try to defeat the right to housing. We have to be very careful in bringing forward the proposal that we ensure that those red herrings are eliminated, that racists do not get the opportunity to discuss their views in public and that the right to housing is incorporated into the Constitution. That is a broader point on the right to housing. We still have a long way to go to have a civic society campaign on that, and I think we can all work together on it. My question is about the LDA and Traveller-specific accommodation.

Mr. John O'Connor: I will take that question first. I wish to declare that I am on the board of the Land Development Agency. The issues Deputy McAuliffe raises probably have not been a major part of the discussion in the Land Development Agency, but in both the agency and in all developments we need to look at being inclusive of Traveller accommodation. There has been a tendency to be too segregated in the provision of Traveller accommodation. Both local authorities and the LDA need to look at every development from the point of view of whether we can include Traveller accommodation and not have it segregated. From my experience of Traveller accommodation, it has been too segregated, too isolated and not engaged, although, again, there have been some very positive examples of it being done well.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I am sorry to cut off Mr. O'Connor. I am conscious of the time. The proposals that came forward last night were really significant because in Dublin and Cork they allow for 100% affordable and social housing on public land. That means that all the traditional biases, which are unjustified, surrounding the provision of Traveller accommodation within an overall development, how it might impact open market sale and so on are now off the table. The LDA is a unique opportunity for us to address the issue of provision, and it is public provision. That should be the overall goal. I am conscious Mr. O'Connor is a member of the board. That is why I raised this issue. The LDA is an opportunity for us to address the wider housing issue but specifically the Traveller accommodation issue.

Mr. John O'Connor: I undertake to bring up the matter specifically with the board of the LDA such that it is part of its agenda.

Mr. Mike Allen: We very much welcome the fact that that debate on the use of public land

for Traveller accommodation has come into the LDA debate. That is very positive. The debate about integration is also very positive. I have just one small word of warning, which is that the integration of Traveller-specific accommodation is not achieved simply by putting it adjacent to the social housing estate, which is the view that was taken in far too many towns. That is problematic as well. The integration needs to be with the wider community. The more prosperous owner-occupier parts of town are where the real integration comes in. It should be remembered as well that the building of communities is not just about delivering the homes or integration of the physical housing; an additional element is needed. One of the things we have failed to do is understand the role of community development workers and people working in the social care environment in building up communities. The work Focus Ireland has done with Sligo County Council in the Cranmore estate is a real example of interaction, community development and workers on the ground turning a community which was seen as problematic into a place where people want to live. We often neglect that role for human beings and community development - the workers and skills that go into making the communities work - and just build the housing and then walk away.

Ms Roslyn Molloy: To add to Mr. Allen's and Mr. O'Connor's replies, another very positive sign is the establishment of Cena and the work it is doing. As well as developing group housing schemes and acquiring homes, it has developed its own model of needs assessment, strategic accommodation planning, home design and feasibility studies. It is working with eight local authorities and two large AHBs on that. It believes in the importance of building community and is working on the sustainability and future-proofing of Traveller accommodation within the wider community.

Chairman: The committee is looking at getting Cena in in the future. Cena is a housing agency led by Travellers, for Travellers. It is important we hear from Cena at a later date. Today is about holding other services to account. I thank Ms Molloy for raising that with us.

I wish to ask a question of Focus Ireland. We all know that Travellers are 22 times more likely to be discriminated against when looking for accommodation in the private sector. Do the witnesses have any suggestions as to how we could tackle the discrimination and racism Travellers face when looking for private accommodation? I see many a Traveller homeless today, living in hotels and so on and being evicted from those hotels. A lot of the time people have issues when homeless. What I mean by that is that homelessness has an impact on their mental health, well-being, etc. As a community development worker, I have even seen Travellers refused homelessness services many a time. Mr. Allen rightly said community development workers play an important part in trying to support families and individuals to get the likes of HAP, to get onto various lists and so on. How can we tackle discrimination within this sector?

Ms Rosemary Hennigan: It is a huge problem. One of the basic problems is that the private rental sector has become so dominant in our response to homelessness, that there are weaknesses within that sector in general and that it is particularly difficult for marginalised groups because there are not enough ways in which we can protect against discrimination. There is the formal equality protection under the legislation, which I am sure you are aware of, Chair. Discrimination on the grounds of being in receipt of the housing assistance payment has been introduced as well, so you can bring a discrimination case on those grounds. We have recently been working with and supporting people who have experienced this and we have been trying to bring them through the process. The reality is that, as the Chair says, when a person is experiencing the crisis of homelessness he or she is not always able to also concentrate on a process of vindicating his or her rights. One thing we could explore is not having the onus be on the

person who has been subject to the discrimination to take that case. Thus we would, to some degree, have our enforcement and accountability agencies, namely, the IHREC or the Ombudsman, taking a more proactive approach in taking on those investigations themselves and not needing to have a plaintiff or an applicant who will come forward and go through that process, because it can be very time-consuming. It can be very emotionally involved for a person to have to present that evidence as well. If we place that on a person who themselves is actively living in homelessness, it is unrealistic to expect them to actually vindicate those rights. We should therefore explore whether we can enable our authorities, which are at a bit of a distance from it, to take that on themselves instead. That is one thing I recommend.

On their support needs in emergency accommodation, we could do more in respect of case management by allowing for, say, lower case ratios, whereby a support case worker would be working with a lower number of families or households to be able to give them that support and spend more time with those who maybe have higher needs. That is another thing I recommend we explore.

Mr. John O'Connor: If I could briefly add to what Ms Hennigan has said, Focus Ireland is one additional support organisation and another is Threshold. It does a lot of work directly with landlords and support tenants in properties. That works well, where there is more engagement with landlords and they know the tenant is going to be properly supported. I agree with Ms Hennigan that more support makes a big difference.

Ms Rosaleen Molloy: I will add that in terms of number of families in homelessness, we included in our submission the number of families who were homeless in Dublin city and region. At the time, in 2018, it was 100 families. That has now fallen back to 80 families. From the reports Focus Ireland has been publishing, there has been a fall back in family homelessness. It is a positive that within the Traveller community, family homelessness has also fallen back in the Dublin area. One reason given, when I was speaking to somebody in the Traveller accommodation area, was that the case study approach was being taken in 2019 with families who were from a Traveller background to try to work with them on their accommodation needs.

Chairman: It would be interesting, Ms Molloy, to get more information on that if possible because I find it difficult to think the numbers have gone down between 2018 and today. I say that because of the evidence of homelessness I have been seeing. This includes families but especially young Travellers, men and women, along with two or three kids. Homelessness within the Traveller community is more evident to me over the past two years, as is hidden homelessness within the community. It would be interesting to get more details around those figures showing a decline in the Dublin area. Obviously, outside Dublin, homelessness is an issue for Travellers in the likes of counties Donegal and Sligo. There is overcrowding on halting sites, people sleeping on couches and sharing homes and so on. I would appreciate it if we could get some more information on that.

Ms Rosaleen Molloy: We will follow up on that and come back to the committee with written information.

Chairman: Thank you so much.

Mr. Mike Allen: If I can come in there briefly, it is important to say about the figures Ms Molloy was referring to, and which we published, that the official measurement of homelessness is the number of people in emergency shelter that is paid for under section 10. Some people criticise the figures and say they do not reflect reality and so on. They reflect very

clearly a very specific form of reality. We have some reservations about the way we count families who are in own-door accommodation and the changes made there. We have some of the best measurements and regular measurements of that form of homelessness of any country in the world. What we do not have is any sort of measure of the less official forms of homelessness which are covered under the European typology of homelessness and housing exclusion, ETHOS, definition of homelessness, namely, the sofa-surfing the Chair referred to or the people who are doubling up, that is, two families living in one housing unit and so on. They are captured to some extent by the work the Housing Agency does on the waiting lists but there are recognised limitations to that. In understanding homelessness more deeply and how we need to solve it and its relation to the housing crisis, we must broaden our definitions and understanding of homelessness but in a way that does not dismiss the quality of the data we already have and the progress we are making on that narrower form of homelessness. I am aware that is quite a complex sort of thing to say but we must avoid throwing out the measurements we have because they do not fully count everything we might wish to. It is about recognising the achievements we have made while recognising the very considerable distances we must go to solve the problem overall.

Chairman: It is really important that Mr. Allen has brought up the achievements, which are critically important, but also our definition of what homelessness is. There are many homeless families in a hotel on the Kylemore Road who are from many different ethnic minority groups etc. Technically, because they are not on the streets, they are not homeless. If the number has gone down to 80 families on Dublin's streets, I can understand that. Mr. Allen is right that we must look at the different definitions of homelessness and that should be clear to people and to wider society as well. Thanks for reminding us of that. Do any other members wish to come in?

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I have a brief question. I thank the witnesses for coming in. A lot of stuff has already been covered but we have had previous witnesses before the committee who have called for the establishment of a national body to deal purely with Traveller accommodation. We have seen councils not drawing down funds and so on. Is that something the organisations would support?

Mr. Mike Allen: We have had some interesting conversations with Traveller organisations, and Pavee Point in particular, about the work they are doing in this area. There is a real challenge here, in that Travellers have been recognised as an ethnic group and many Travellers have specific housing requirements in terms of Traveller-specific accommodation and broader needs and, therefore, a need for a specialist group that can recognise that. On the other hand, there is the need to integrate it into the main housing system, both in the way local authorities are and the way mainstream homeless organisations need to be more reflective of Traveller needs. I do not think anybody is in favour of a new homeless organisation that specialises in homeless Travellers. There is a real challenge there of both integrating and having specialist skills. While I can see the need for the specialist organisation, to deliver it without actually marginalising the issue such that the mainstream no longer feels it has to be dealt with will be a really tricky question. I do not have a direct answer to it but we need to be careful of going down that route without thinking of a need to integrate, while recognising that the demand for specialised housing organisation for Travellers does not come out of nowhere. It comes out of generations of frustration and it needs to be taken seriously but also in the broader context.

Mr. John O'Connor: A lot of the issues are in respect of the levels of resistance to Traveller accommodation right throughout the country. A lot of it may come back to the planning sys-

tems. I will bring Ms Molloy back in on this because the expert group has a lot to say around possible changes in the planning system and a better focus and alignment in the delivery of Traveller-specific accommodation.

Ms Roslyn Molloy: There is the planning and then there is the national body question. Were a national body to be building and developing Traveller-specific accommodation, there is a concern, as Mr. Allen has said, that we would almost be another step removed. This was one of the findings. One of the report's recommendations is to establish a national authority and to extend the remit of the national Traveller accommodation consultative committee. At the moment, it is an advisory body and a lot of the work that we have done in the Housing Agency has come through from that advisory body as recommendations to the Minister to carry out research in particular areas. It was the view that there needed to be greater monitoring. The review commissioned by the Housing Agency on the Traveller accommodation programme, TAP, pointed out the need to look at who was following up when the Traveller accommodation programmes in local authorities were not achieving and meeting their targets. Who is taking on the oversight to do this? The review found there needed to be independent monitoring of all of that aspect. This is one of the recommendations that has gone to the programme implementation board. When it comes to some of the information, we can definitely see why that would be the case. A body that is building and developing Traveller-specific accommodation might be a moving away from alignment. As Mr. O'Connor said, there was an issue with the planning whereby things were not aligned. The Traveller accommodation programmes are not aligned with the local development plans, for example. They should all be running on the same cycle. Similarly, rather than taking Travellers and creating yet another distance, their housing needs should be aligned and matched with all of the other processes and administrative procedures and be structured within local and regional development and the regional assemblies. That was another area of planning that was suggested to be looked at.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Is there any indication as to when we would see a report from the programme board set up by the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke? Do we have a date? I am aware they are looking at the 37 recommendations but do the witnesses have any indication of the timeframe on this report?

Ms Roslyn Molloy: We do not have that. It would be with the Department or the Minister. There is a programme whereby they have taken 18 of the 30 or so recommendations. They are looking at implementing them and working on them in 2021. There is progress that way. Currently there are 11 projects up and running.

Chairman: Would any other member like to ask a question?

Deputy Joan Collins: I have a question for Mr. Allen or Ms Molloy about Housing First. Obviously there is a Housing First policy, whether that is with the Peter McVerry Trust or with Focus Ireland. Specifically on the key worker and the relationship with the Housing First client, who is it that makes the decision when there is no longer a need for a key worker to work with the person? Is that decision made by the key worker or are the two people brought into Housing First, Focus Ireland, or the Peter McVerry Trust for an analysis of where the person is and if he or she can move on? This is probably a little bit off the question that we are dealing with here. This is about contact with the individual Traveller.

Mr. Mike Allen: The Deputy is referring to cases where our assessment is made that there is no longer any need for case management support. In good practice, that decision would be made by the funder, which would be the local authority and the health board, and by the direct

provider, which would be an organisation like ourselves, or the Peter McVerry Trust or Simon. It is also an absolute principle of Housing First that it would be done along with the individual person. While I have not come across it that often, most commonly we get a sense that local authorities and health boards would say that people are being supported for longer than they actually need and that we should back off and let the person have his or her independence. It is hard to say without specifics. In another case, withdrawal of support might be to do with health and safety issues or other forms of risk which can arise and have arisen. If it is just withdrawing the support because the person has met the settlement indicators, this must be done in collaboration with the tenant.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank Mr. Allen.

Chairman: Would any other member like to come in or would any witness like to make final remarks?

Mr. John O'Connor: If there is any further information that the committee needs, it should come back to us. We have a significant amount of information and reports. If there is any specific area, then please come back to us and we will provide that information.

Chairman: We will do that. I thank the witnesses for coming in today and presenting to the committee. It was a very informative discussion. I thank all of the witnesses and I ask that they continue the good work they are doing.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.49 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Thursday, 22 July 2021.