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, 7 Deireadh Fómhair 2021

Thursday, 7 October 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 1.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Joan Collins,	Pauline O'Reilly.
Patrick Costello,	
Dessie Ellis,	
Denise Mitchell,	
Bríd Smith,	
David Stanton.	

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

Traveller Accommodation: Discussion (Resumed)

Vice Chairman: I welcome everyone to our meeting this afternoon. Apologies have been received from Senator Eileen Flynn.

The Ceann Comhairle, Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl, and the Cathaoirleach, Senator Mark Daly, have appealed to everybody in the parliamentary community to continue to follow public health advice, wear masks and maintain social distancing. I request that members, witnesses and staff use the wipes and hand sanitisers provided to clean shared seats and desks to supplement regular sanitation. This will help mitigate the risk of Covid-19, including the Delta variant, spreading among the parliamentary community.

Members and all in attendance are asked to exercise personal responsibility in protecting themselves and others from the risk of contracting Covid-19. They are strongly advised to practise good hand hygiene and they will notice that every second seat has been removed to facilitate social distancing. I urge them not to move any chair from its current position. They should also always maintain an appropriate level of social distance during and after the meeting. Masks, preferably of medical grade, should always be worn during the meeting, except when members are speaking. I ask them for their full co-operation on this.

Before we hear from our witnesses, we have some business to attend to regarding the rules around privilege. I remind members that they must be in the Leinster House complex in order to attend this meeting. If any member attempts to participate from outside Leinster House, I will ask him or her to leave the meeting. I remind witnesses that as they are giving their evidence from outside Leinster House, they may not have the same privilege as if they were in Leinster House. They may think it 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. If I indicate that I believe a witness is breaking this rule, he or she must stop. The first business is the approval of the minutes of the committee meetings held on 23 September 2021. These minutes have been approved in the virtual private session but this must be done again in public session for procedural reasons. Can I take it that the minutes of the meetings on 23 September are agreed to? Agreed.

Before we hear from our witnesses, I suggest that we publish the opening statements. Is it agreed to publish the opening statements from Cena Culturally Appropriate Homes and Simon Communities of Ireland on the committee website? Agreed.

This is our sixth public meeting on access to housing accommodation, including Traveller-specific and culturally appropriate accommodation. The committee looks forward to continuing a debate on the issues surrounding Traveller housing and accommodation. The conversation around housing and accommodation, especially culturally appropriate and Traveller-specific accommodation, is a very important one and is one of the key issues affecting the Traveller community. The ability to access housing and accommodation, facilities and services within culturally appropriate accommodation and the high levels of homelessness within the Traveller communities are topics we will discuss with representatives from Cena Culturally Appropriate Homes and Simon Communities of Ireland. The committee looks forward to continuing this important debate with our guests on this subject and to a wider discussion around these issues. Arising from all of these proceedings, we will prepare a report and publish recommendations. On behalf of the committee I am delighted to extend a warm welcome to our witnesses. I welcome Mr. Brian Dillon, project development officer, and Ms Bridgie Casey, home acquisition

manager, Cena Culturally Appropriate Homes; and Mr. Wayne Stanley, head of policy and communications, and Ms Andrea Fitzgerald, service manager, Galway Simon Community, from the Simon Communities of Ireland.

I ask Mr. Dillon and Ms Casey now to make their opening statements of five to ten minutes.

Ms Bridgie Casey: I thank the committee for inviting us to discuss the issues affecting my community. I am a member of the Traveller community and have worked on Traveller accommodation over a number of years, and now work with Cena. For people who do not know what Cena is, it is the word for home in Traveller language. Cena is an approved housing body, AHB, that is working for and with Travellers to address critical accommodation needs.

My people, as Travellers, continue to suffer the worst living conditions of any section of the population. A large number of my people are living in overcrowded settings with a lack of basic services and in unsafe and despicable conditions. The ongoing accommodation crisis has a knock-on effect from a health perspective, especially on mental health, with a suicide rate that is seven times higher than that of the settled population. This also has to be seen from the perspective of members of my community making any meaningful progression through education or employment.

Responses to this ongoing accommodation crisis have to date fallen short and have regularly failed to meet the needs of my people, a fact acknowledged both at Irish and European level. Accommodation policy to date has discriminated against and isolated our community. This has contributed to social problems, dysfunctional communities, social divisions and prejudices that are deeply ingrained in Irish society.

Cena was established by Travellers and is Traveller-led in the firm belief that more effective, sustainable and just solutions can be found if the community itself is given the space to formulate and implement its own accommodation responses. Cena is committed to building homes that are culturally appropriate in communities that are cohesive.

My colleague, Mr. Dillon, will discuss in-depth some of the learning points about Cena and solutions that it brings to the table on Traveller culturally appropriate accommodation. I thank the committee.

Mr. Brian Dillon: I thank Ms Casey and the Vice Chairman. Following on from what Ms Casey said, the core message we are bringing to the table is that any kind of forward solution to Traveller accommodation, which has been acknowledged as failing in so many respects to date, must be one that has the Traveller community itself at the heart of that response.

I do not propose to spend any of the limited time we have explaining to the committee what Cena is or what we do. We circulated a summary map for members if they would like to know where and how we are involved and our level of activity.

It is more important in the couple of minutes that we have now to let the committee know the main lessons that are emerging for us as Cena and to give our analysis of where we think this fits in future policy direction or decisions that need to be made urgently around this.

There are a number of different principles, which we have circulated in a summary paper. The committee will notice when reading this short document that very few of the points we are making have to do with bricks and mortar or building a particular style of house. I will go through these quickly but these principles are more around community and family ownership,

which is at the centre of everything we do. We have workers with us who are trained members of the Traveller community working with people in their own community to begin a discussion about need. Our most important starting principle is assessing the need for Traveller-appropriate accommodation. Our own experience is that this has not been done. It may have been done on paper or in terms of meeting particular criteria to produce reports and strategic plans but it has not been done to the extent or the space that Travellers themselves need to determine not just what their needs are to get out of a crisis situation by next week, but what these needs are for their children, their future generations and so forth.

That is the project that we have been engaged with in Cena. We have had Travellers speaking to Travellers about what the solutions are in the longer term. An essential part of that discussion has been referred to and is referred to in the title of this committee meeting, which is Traveller-appropriate or culturally appropriate accommodation.

It is our firm belief that this has never been defined. People have put opinions and interpretations forward but the engagement that we have had to date with the Traveller community has begun to define what Traveller-appropriate actually means. Involving Travellers in that discussion has made a significant difference because any kind of effort in the past to interpret what we as settled people might think what that means has utterly failed. Not only have they failed to provide accommodation but they have led to the disastrous results, which Ms Casey has referred to, which cut right across mental health, relationships between the settled community and the Traveller community and to the heart of the division and discrimination that happens.

Our firm belief then is that the starting point is that Travellers begin to define this. We believe Travellers are only now beginning to define it. We are working with the best architects, people in that profession who we think may be listening for the first time. We are working with surveyors who are beginning to imagine and believe there are actually solutions to these issues as soon as Travellers are put in control of those solutions, but not only in defining them. The building of the homes, in our experience to date, is the very easy part of the job we do. The more difficult and challenging part is to create ownership around those homes, to create a representative voice for Travellers in those homes and our own tenants and to be able to make sure that a future-proofing takes place.

A serious failure of past policy has been to ignore future implications. We work with families to look at when new family formation is likely to happen and we begin to renegotiate accommodation needs as soon as that happens. We view that as essential to long-term sustainability.

Members will see in the document we wrote that we put a strong emphasis on working across communities. We use the term "community relations". It means we put as much effort into working with settled communities as we do with the Travelling community. This is based firmly on building mutual respect and an informed understanding of the benefits of diversity. We have our own people who are all members of the Traveller community trained to deliver that.

I will finish by pointing to a couple of the policy implications that have been important in our experience to date and we think will be important going forward. The expert review group report on Traveller accommodation was very clear - and it was in agreement with some of the points Ms Casey made - that we are looking at abject failure across the board as a starting point and that we have a legacy of failure and neglect. Most important, the report points to the need for another approach that actually involves Travellers in arriving at the solution.

Cena is the only Traveller housing body to work across other agencies. The point was made that approved housing bodies, sometimes with the best will in the world, feel unable and perhaps not knowledgeable enough to take on or deal adequately with Traveller issues. We are beginning to do that now. The Department has just approved a programme for us in order that we can bring on staff and work across the other approved housing bodies and across local authorities. I do not want to offer any kind of simplified solution or give the impression that we do not think there are a number of very serious and complex issues here. We say very firmly to the committee, however, that the approach we have taken has proved itself to us and should go forward in policy terms as there are solutions to this. These problems can be addressed. There is a model we have developed that can work. Rather than any kind of long-term elaborate policy discussion or any other set of aspirations that may not actually come into practice, we think we should start implementing this model and addressing this problem. Cena is committed to doing that.

We are also committed to working with any other organisation. The Simon Communities will make a presentation following ours. We have already engaged with them on this. We know that co-operation across agencies is essential but that it has to be done as a Traveller-centred model. That is our one big message we would like people to take away from our presentation. I know I have not given a lot of detail on what we do or how we do it but we are open to answer any questions members may have on that.

Vice Chairman: Thank you very much, Mr. Dillon and Ms Casey. I now call Mr. Stanley and Ms Fitzgerald. I suggest they make an opening statement of about five to ten minutes. Will they please let us know who is leading off?

Mr. Wayne Stanley: I will give our opening statement and Ms Fitzgerald, who is very much on the front line of this, will engage with the committee's questions. First, I apologise. I am filling in for a colleague who had a bereavement and was not able to attend at the last minute. I have to step out at 2.30 p.m. and my colleague, Ms Fitzgerald, will stay. I hope the committee will not take offence to my leaving early.

The Simon Communities thank the committee for the opportunity to address it on this important issue and the important work of the committee. As the committee will be aware, we are a network of independent communities across the country that provide homeless housing and treatment services to people facing the trauma and stress of homelessness. In 2019, the Simon Communities in Ireland supported more than 18,000 men, women and children at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

The front-line experience of the Simon Communities tells us that members of the Travelling community are much more likely to experience homelessness. Irish Travellers make up less than 1% of the population but national figures show that members of the Travelling community are significantly over-represented among those of our community who experience homelessness. Our front-line experience shows us that there are clear structural reasons for this and we wish to take the time with our opening statement to outline these briefly to the committee.

I will start by acknowledging that, as the committee will be aware, we are in the midst of a homelessness and housing crisis. With two critically important exceptions, the structural causes of housing exclusion and homelessness that we see driving up numbers of families and individuals in homelessness are just as acute for members of the Travelling community as they are for the rest of Irish society. The two exceptions are the lack of culturally appropriate accommodation options and the levels of discrimination that are a particular experience of members

of the Travelling community.

The impact of discrimination we see in our work is twofold. First, a landlord's realisation that a household is from the Traveller community can see it being refused or overlooked for accommodation. Second, an awareness of this discrimination can have a debilitating impact on the confidence of a household to engage with the private rental market, undermining its potential to secure accommodation.

As members will be aware, the primary route out of homelessness, and the primary location of homes into which households can be diverted to prevent homelessness, is in the private rental market. Ireland is currently in the grip of a housing crisis that is playing out significantly in the private rental market. There is an acute lack of affordable accommodation, and the rates being charged to tenants are largely beyond what is affordable under the housing assistance payment, HAP, even with the increased discretion available to local authorities for households at risk of homelessness. This, combined with the discrimination already mentioned and issues such as larger family size, makes the private rental market often an unsuitable or unattainable accommodation option for many in the Traveller community.

While many members of the Travelling community who experience homelessness are searching for a home in the private rental market or seeking social housing, a number of households, in our experience, wish to avail of accommodation that would allow them to continue to live within the traditional structures of their community. The absence of these options serves to increase homelessness, overcrowding and structural homelessness.

The census data tell us that, on average, Traveller households are larger than households in the State overall. This can make finding appropriate accommodation in the private rental market difficult, as I have said, and limit the availability of social housing. In general, local authorities will not accommodate a larger family in a smaller unit as the family would immediately have to be transferred to a priority list as an overcrowded household. Addressing this issue requires that the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage amend the social housing net income limits or the incomes considered in the regulations to take account of larger family sizes. This is an additional point. In extreme cases, particularly in band 3 local authority areas, we are seeing large families excluded from the social housing lists because of the way household income is counted. When family members are recipients of social income, the household income is often in excess of the bands and this excludes the family from access to social housing supports, including HAP payments, which makes homelessness almost inevitable.

Overcrowding has been shown to be a driver of increased homelessness, and that is throughout society. Often, it is driven by a household being unable to secure alternative private rental accommodation and another family taking them in. With single people we refer to this as couch-surfing. While these arrangements can work in the short and medium term, they are not sustainable long-term.

The Simon Communities provide supports to members of the Traveller community, as we do all those experiencing homelessness. We are conscious that we are not representatives or spokespersons for the Traveller community. What we have set out are the structural impediments that through our work we see contributing to homelessness and longer periods in homelessness for members of the Traveller community that we support.

I refer to an important point made earlier by Mr. Dillon. When we talk about culturally appropriate accommodation, our understanding of that is what members of the Traveller commu-

nity with whom we work tell us they need. We do not set any terms or definition of "culturally appropriate housing". It was interesting that Mr. Dillon said that discussion is ongoing. That is worthy of consideration.

Some of the issues raised require structural change, but it is clear that as a society we have to work to address the discrimination experienced by members of the Traveller community. We would also note that all public bodies in Ireland have a responsibility to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of their employees, customers, service users and everyone affected by their policies and plans. This is a legal obligation, known as the public sector equality and human rights duty, which originated in section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014. Some local authorities are progressing this and doing a lot of work in this area. This duty sets a framework and foundation from which to build.

On the Traveller accommodation programmes, TAPs, we have to acknowledge that many local authorities recognise the discrimination that Traveller households suffer and they do allocate public housing. It is clear that much more work will have to be undertaken to ensure the increased provision of culturally appropriate accommodation for members of the Traveller community throughout the State. In the first instance, the targets set out in the TAPs have to be met. There should also be a review of accommodation needs targets and appropriateness of the accommodation options being offered to ensure the needs of the Traveller community are being met.

On discretion with regard to the HAP, we have to ensure those at risk of or experiencing homelessness are not evicted or cannot secure a home due to insufficient income to meet their housing cost. The Government commitment in Housing for All to review the discretion available to local authorities on the rates of HAP should be expedited. Outside of Dublin, but also in the Dublin region, allowing for the discretion available to local authorities, they are not able to meet market rents. While we understand and agree that local authorities and, indeed, Government policy should not chase an unaffordable private rental market, this cannot be done on the backs of the most vulnerable. We have to ensure there are mechanisms in place such that people can exit homelessness or can be prevented from entering it.

I thank the joint committee for the opportunity to engage. We welcome any questions.

Vice Chairman: I thank Mr. Stanley. We will understand if he needs to leave early. The first speaker is Deputy Ellis.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. When was Cena established? I had a look at the summary map and there are approximately nine areas where Traveller housing is being built by Cena. I acknowledge the definition of Cena and that it is as an AHB. It is great that it is engaging and working with Travellers on the work that needs to be done.

There is a problem regarding Traveller accommodation and the local authorities. I will give an example. The Traveller site in St. Mary's Park, Dunsink Lane is administered by Dublin City Council, but a portion of the land is in the Fingal area. There is a proposal to construct two additional houses on the site but my understanding is the Traveller section of Dublin City Council is struggling to get Fingal County Council to agree to the provision of the land to build those houses, which is ridiculous because nothing has been built on it for years despite the

population growth in that area. St. Joseph's Park is also administered by Dublin City Council, but it is located in Fingal. I would like to hear about the relationship between Cena and the local authorities and if Cena encounters problems in its engagement with them.

Mental health is a big issue among the Traveller community, unfortunately. Does Cena have any role in that regard? Unemployment is also a big issue and, as in all communities, education and trying to bring people on to higher education is a major issue. What progress is being made on Traveller education? There has been a little progress, but it appears to be a struggle all of the time.

The Simon Communities are doing a good job in dealing with homelessness and accommodation. Increasingly, people from the Traveller community are entering homeless accommodation, following which they are housed under HAP. This is breaking up the Traveller community. I find it very frustrating that we are not building enough. The local authorities have been condemned for their lack of use of the funding that is being made available to them. We need to push for more accommodation. I would like to hear a little more in that regard.

Vice Chairman: We will hear answers from Simon Communities first and then Cena.

Mr. Wayne Stanley: Most the questions were directed to Mr. Dillon and Ms Casey. On accommodation, the Deputy is correct that the answer to homelessness is a home. If we had more appropriate homes, we would have less homelessness because the supports and the community work are there. Mr. Dillon and Ms Casey are correct that we need to make sure we are all working together and to also make sure that all the voices are heard. We did that well when during Covid we moved to a real client-centred approach. We can do much better in terms of homelessness with that type of approach. With cross-sectoral agencies such as Cena and Simon Communities Ireland working together and looking upstream at why so many people are coming into homelessness, perhaps we can build a preventative strategy as well, which would be more than welcome.

In the most extreme cases of support that we offer, we build or purchase the home as a mechanism to get somebody out of homelessness. The answer is 100% accommodation. I am not sure if I have answered the Deputy's question. Ms Fitzgerald might like to come at this point regarding the front-line experience.

Ms Andrea Fitzgerald: I will give a bit of context in terms of where I am coming from. I am a front-line service manager with Galway Simon Community. I have responsibility for a prevention service in County Galway. I am also the regional co-ordinator for Housing First across Galway, Roscommon and Mayo. Prevention is a huge part of the work we try to carry out. Our work is underpinned by trying to avoid people having to enter into the emergency accommodation available. There may be other relevant questions on that later but I think the questions are geared towards Mr. Dillon from Cena.

Mr. Brian Dillon: I will go through the Deputy's questions. Ms Casey may wish to respond to the questions on a particular local authority and on education and mental health. There is an interesting history to Cena in that it probably took about five years to convince at policy level that there was a need for recognising. The notion of an approved housing body is itself a recognition, in principle, that the particular needs of particular sections of the population can be met by a legally structured, established approved housing body. That argument was won thanks to Ms Casey and many of her people who fought for it for years.

To answer the question directly, Cena has only been existence in a full-time capacity for about three years. The Deputy is right to comment on how far we have got. We probably shocked ourselves in how far we have gone with that in three years. We are very confident in the model we are building. The Deputy spoke about problems with local authorities. That is day-to-day existence for us. It is also a serious educational process all around. We have battles and all sorts of differences around how things are interpreted and seen. However, we are demonstrating that this can be done and there are different ways of approaching it. The Deputy gave as an example the question of whether people have to be separated or split up. No, they do not. Do people have to be forced into urban areas or the edges of urban environments when they do not want to move to them? No, they do not. Can people have aspects of their culture without the world falling down? Yes, they can. We have proved we can be very clear what these are, both within legislation and compliance and in other areas. Our work is slow in the sense that we are working through local authorities one by one, but we are demonstrating that this can be done when Travellers are centrally involved in the process and given that control. It is probably a long process.

Just on the local authority question, the support we are now being given by the Department provides for a specific process on bringing our model to local authorities. We will have one worker and a complete programme to demonstrate across one county how this actually operates, including how we do the needs assessment correctly, how we get homes built and properties acquired and how we set up those working relationships with the Traveller community. We will then extend that across Ireland. I believe we will have a major part to play in redefining what the TAP is or what should be there instead of these programmes. That is a work in progress but we never expected it to be an easy journey. It took a long time to create this problem so we know it will be built block on block.

The Deputy raised a very important point on mental health and all the corresponding issues. We have trained people from the Traveller community who work in their own community to assess needs but also set up Traveller-to-Traveller relationships in terms of managing properties and looking to future generations and building their own community with them. We found very early that it is impossible for people to be fully trained in that capacity without knowing a great deal about mental health issues and the issues Mr. Stanley from the Simon Communities mentioned, namely, the day-to-day discrimination people are facing and the link between that daily discrimination and mental health and rates of suicide.

There are things happening. We work very closely with the National Traveller Mental Health Network. It is holding a major event County Mayo tomorrow and we will participate in that. We connect with the network. As the Simon Communities mentioned, these things are not possible for one agency. It is about connecting and opening up. We also work consistently with the Traveller Counselling Service. We know we cannot deal with accommodation in isolation but it is not possible to address any of these other issues without first looking at accommodation. As Ms Casey said, people are living in Third World conditions. We address that issue first but we also try to work on the issues around it.

Down the road, as we are reconstructing dwellings and doing buy-and-renew in rural areas, we have young Travellers already working for us at a more unskilled level. We want Traveller contractors to come in and do this work, and we are building on that. We want apprenticeships in the more skilled areas of kitchen fitting. We have all that as a programme. I fully agree that accommodation is only one element. We are starting there and trying to build the other elements around it.

I do not know if I misrepresented the local authority issue because it is kind of a mixed bag for us.

Ms Bridgie Casey: To go back to mental health, my experience of working with Travellers and Cena is that when we talk to Travellers face to face about accommodation, we find that the most basic human right is a roof over your head. Without that, there is no start in life for anybody, whether that person is a Traveller or a settled person.

Mental health problems are a big issue in the Travelling community where the rate is seven times higher than in the settled community. I have documented, in the cases of a number of Travellers I have met in the last year, the environment they live in, whether it is a halting site that is very run down and has terrible conditions or a housing estate where their cultural needs have been taken away and they can no longer be a Traveller or practise their way of life and culture or even have the family support around them. That is a very big issue. It also has a big effect on children's education and well-being.

We are working with a number of local authorities on delivering Traveller-specific accommodation. We work daily with Travellers and we are talking to them. As Mr. Dillon explained, we are providing training. Travellers are being trained and are going out to work with the community. This is the way forward for finding some sort of solutions for Traveller accommodation. Sometimes Travellers were not given an option or choice on their accommodation or whether they wanted to live in a group housing scheme or halting site, although I hate that term. At a very early stage, Travellers were not part of any process in relation to accommodation or the issues that affect their lives. It was something that was always developed and then Travellers had to accept it. Cena will bring a lot to the table. We are not the answer to everything around accommodation but we can achieve in a way with our community, especially working with other housing bodies, local authorities and other statutory organisations. We cannot do it on our own, however. We have to work together as a team with other agencies.

Vice Chairman: I will now call Deputy Denise Mitchell, followed by Deputy Joan Collins.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I thank the witnesses for their opening statements. I have a few brief questions. The first three questions will be to Cena. In their opening statement, they talked about bringing a clear definition and understanding of appropriate Traveller accommodation. I wonder if they could expand on that. What do they think should be included in the definition of "appropriate accommodation"? Cena also talked in its opening statement about keeping animals and the need for outdoor storage. What engagement has Cena had with the local authorities on that? My final question is on the assessment of need. I agree it should be broadened. However, what should these broader assessments look like?

My final question is to both organisations. The committee has heard at previous meetings that Travellers are 22 times more likely than non-Travellers to be discriminated against in private accommodation. How can that be addressed?

Mr. Brian Dillon: There are only two elements of "appropriate accommodation" that are in an official capacity. They were only in ministerial guidelines that were circulated to local authorities at the time of the establishment of national Traveller accommodation consultative committee. What they named as the two elements was first, an association with nomadism, and second, animal keeping, to which the Deputy also referred. These animals are usually horses, although we have found that it is not just horses; there are all sorts of animals right across the board. Those were the two elements in the guidelines.

We have been convinced of two further elements since from our engagement with Travellers right across the country. The first of these is the space to which the Deputy referred. People refer to this space as storage space, but it is not. We have problems trying to convince architects, designers and planners of the importance of including a shed at the back of a house, as well as of what the shed is for. It is amazing that the men's shed movement, and movements like that, are all well accepted in the settled community, yet we struggled to convince others of their importance to Travellers. It is as if they think that someone will manufacture explosives or something, or that they will do something illegal in the shed. It is a men's shed concept, and it might be more important for Traveller men as meeting spaces. That is the other bit. Most people think that is frivolous or not serious. The usual local authority response is there is a coal shed or a coal shed side building.

The other point that is important to us is the issue of design. What does a Traveller house look like? Nobody can answer that question. We have begun that discussion right across a number of counties with Travellers. The results of that discussion are astounding. We have an architect working in Galway who is now building five houses. These are brilliant because they are incorporating the notion of the shed. The discussion that the architect had with Travellers was seriously enlightening. He asked: what is the difference between living in a chalet, a mobile and a house? He asked if he could build a house for Travellers that reflects their culture. The result is amazing. The most amazing thing for me was that none of the Travellers were ever asked that question before. There are houses in Ireland that have won architectural prizes for being good practice. They were basically what, with the best will in the world, settled people thought would be good for Travellers. We are therefore only beginning to get there with that element. That is one of the four elements.

As well as animal keeping, there is the association with nomadism. This is always about caravans, the space for them and the access to them. Caravans are easy to sort out because there are fire regulations and all sorts of things. None of this is illegal. The Deputy mentioned the local authority's position on that. In nearly all those aspects that I have mentioned, including the caravan, animal keeping and the size of the shed, it is not only that these elements are not encouraged. Every time that a Traveller family is offered accommodation, they would be more likely to have to sign an agreement that they would not keep any dogs, or that they will not have any activity in the shed, and that they most definitely would not have a caravan. They, therefore, have to sign tenancy agreements that would sign away their culture, rather than it being accommodated.

We have developed a tenant handbook and a policy, which are within the laws and by-laws. They comply with all of that and it is all perfectly legal. However, the people we have trained as our workers are encouraging people and telling them how they can protect their culture and maintain it. It is a different world when one considers how local authorities see "appropriate accommodation" for Travellers.

The last question was about assessment. We have all that. We have a detailed training programme that we talk with UCC about. We hope that we can professionalise people within it. We have eight different modules involved in that assessment. However, we do not use the word "assessment" anymore because we think it has been so demeaning. When Travellers hear the word "assessment", they will usually immediately ask, "Why would I tell you the truth when all I have got is false promises?" We prefer to say that we create a space where people can make informed decisions about their own futures. This will never happen in one visit; it will take about three or four visits. It is about talking to families individually and then in a group.

Our own people are trained on how to do that. We have that model of assessment. I am sure it exists somewhere else in the world within other communities but, certainly, it is a new thing in Ireland. We do not yet have that training accredited, but it will become part of a third level qualification that we are now negotiating with UCC.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I would also like ask Mr. Stanley how we address the discrimination in private sector.

Mr. Wayne Stanley: That is a good question. The answer is difficult because we respect people's privacy. We made some inroads in the way that HAP has been treated, as well as the way landlords have discriminated HAP. We need to make members of the Traveller community aware that they cannot be refused on the ground of a HAP payment. We should increase the awareness of this. We probably need to look at the legal framework and have a greater understanding of the rights-based approach. People have a right to housing. We are part of a group that is campaigning for the right to housing to be inserted in the Constitution. There are many reasons to do that. One is to address the most egregious areas where the State fails. We have seen this in the right to education. The right to education does not mean that people can have the school of the denomination of their choice, or to have the education provided in the way that they want at the end of their road for their children. Likewise, a right to housing does not mean that everybody gets a home. Rather, it means that where the State or society fails in an egregious way - for members of the Traveller community that is one of the areas - there are more legal remedies when those rights are inserted. That is a statement of where we would like to go. That is what we would like to see. I do not know if Ms Fitzgerald has anything more practical to add.

Ms Andrea Fitzgerald: From the front-line experience, generally, people from the homeless population are discriminated against on a daily basis. However, most definitely, there are significant challenges for members of the Traveller community.

When people are referred to us, our work involves assessing their needs in an holistic manner. Yes, it is that prevention piece and that will be the focus because we cannot address any of the other issues with people if they are not in a home. Part of the needs assessment involves picking out particular areas in a person's life that he or she needs assistance with. All of this is done with the end view that we are trying to build people up and empower them. While we do that, as the professionals, it is our role within that particular remit to challenge discrimination as we encounter it, maybe on a daily or weekly basis. We do not present people as just statistics or particular households. We put a real human face on what is actually going on for people. That is not easy work. We liaise with lots of different agencies on a daily basis. Some of the most successful pieces of work that we have carried out have been when we have been able to attack cases at a multi-agency level. This means that when various stakeholders sit around the table, the client, who is at the centre, is given a voice in a very fair and compassionate way.

Deputy Joan Collins: I am delighted to meet representatives of Cena. I have heard about the organisation but I have never had an opportunity to hear about its work.

Cena, as approved housing body, is now a statutory body. How much money does it receive? How many people work for Cena full-time? We heard about apprenticeships and having architects come on board. How does Cena operate?

The map shows that four properties have been bought. Did Cena link with local authorities to buy these properties? The map also shows that nine homes have been built. Did local au-

thorities or private contractors build these homes? Cena is seeking 22 homes in the Cork, Kerry and Limerick areas. Where will they be located? Will they be in housing estates?

Mr. Dillon made the interesting point that this crisis has been long in the making and it will not be easy to solve it quickly. Trying to plan for the future is also a major problem. People have been living on halting sites for 20 years. They have had children who have grown up and married and now live in caravans on the sites and have their own children. Does Cena track that from the point of view of these families and their future accommodation needs?

The opening statement of the Simon Communities notes that "all public bodies in Ireland have responsibility to promote equality". Is there a reason for including this statement given that it could easily have been left out? Do some bodies not promote equality? Have the Simon Communities found that landlords with just one or two houses or investment funds discriminate against Travellers? Where does discrimination occur?

The committee met retailers when discussing the issue of employment who told us that they had a few employers who promote the employment of Traveller women and men in their workplaces. Could something similar be done with landlords? Could we get a few landlords together to promote the message that no one, whether a person of colour, a Traveller, a single parent or anyone else, should be discriminated against?

Mr. Wayne Stanley: I will respond first because I am conscious I have to leave. Deputy Joan Collins made a point about our opening statement which deserves a response. The reasons for its inclusion are twofold. The first is that we can all do better. The statement was included because some local authorities have taken the issue very seriously and are doing the work. Discrimination is a very hard thing to get hold of, so we either legislate against it in really strong ways, and that is definitely a route that should be looked at, but the other way is to build up a consensus. The public sector duty is quite a soft power in the way that is being implemented but some local authorities are doing it well. That is an opportunity in and of itself to look at how those local authorities are engaging with their communities.

The Deputy suggested bringing landlords together. That could be done through the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB. I am loath to make such a suggestion because we all have an additional suggestion for more work that the RTB should do. However, the RTB is the conduit through which the market works and there is some work to be done there. Traveller organisations should definitely be brought into that because usually discrimination is based on fear.

Deputy Joan Collins: Ignorance.

Mr. Wayne Stanley: Yes, and ignorance. Given that Travellers make up such a small percentage of the population, most people will probably have never had a proper conversation with somebody from the Travelling community. If we could bridge those gaps, we would probably make a lot of progress. I think I have addressed the question on landlords.

Ms Andrea Fitzgerald: It is our experience on the front line that accessing the HAP scheme and engaging with private landlords has definitely become increasingly difficult. As we are all aware, the housing market is very tight anyway. Covid and lockdowns have compounded the problem so the availability is not there in the first instance. Locally, we would have always forged positive relationships with certain landlords that we had done business with previously. Unfortunately, that market has completely dried up now. It is increasingly difficult if new landlords come into the market to broker new relationships because, as the Deputy correctly said,

there are preconceived notions about what that might look like. We are successful in some instances because we have existing relationships with some private landlords but we have not had so much success in other cases.

Mr. Brian Dillon: Ms Casey deals with housing that has been bought and sold and will respond to the highly relevant questions the Deputy asked.

The funding basis for Cena is the same as for any other approved housing body. We do not have any central funding but we can draw down funding from the capital assistance scheme, CAS, to either purchase houses or build homes. We have built four homes in Tullamore, which are occupied, and we are building five homes in Galway. Both of those developments have been funded through CAS. Other people ask relevant questions about all the other issues that need to be fixed because of failed housing policy. We must deal with those as well, but we do not have the money to do so. We are working at it as we go along. We go through the normal public procurement processes, but we have influence to ensure that Travellers are getting employment and that there is an open and friendly way to ensure that young Travellers in particular areas are getting that work. There is much that we can do to influence the process, and we are learning that as we go along. It is a new world for everyone.

I am sure that Ms Casey will back me up when I say that Cena will be successful for as long as it can build and maintain a very strong Traveller voice to control matters. That is the number one priority for Cena. Under our constitution, our aim is for Cena's tenants to own Cena, control its board and become involved in it, which is happening. It is a kind of awareness-building process.

We always struggle for money. We have had significant help through the Housing Agency and the Department giving us some resources towards central co-ordination, but we must wait until we build up - I never know the economic terms - the platform that we need to reach in terms of our rental income. We will act as landlords. What we are saying to Travellers is that they are paying rent to Cena and paying for some other Travellers to get homes. There is a serious ownership aspect to that and our money model. However, our funding model is no different from any other AHB's, nor can it be, given that there are constraints on us.

I will ask Ms Casey deal with the Deputy's question on homes in Galway, Limerick and so on. That is where the matter of discrimination, which we just touched on, comes into things.

She asked a significant question about future planning. There is hardly any example in Ireland of three or four Traveller homes being built in what is called "group housing" where, if we push forward 15 years, there are not suddenly 22 families living there in appalling conditions. Even though the homes might have won a prize for Traveller accommodation at the start, they have become a ghetto. Usually, any investment afterwards is about putting a wall around it so that no one can see it. In Cena, we are having a Traveller-to-Traveller conversation about this. Where people get a home with Cena, we immediately start a discussion about what will happen when their children reach 16, 17 or 18 years of age. We do not wait until they reach that age. When there is no other choice, three or four caravans must be in there. That is good in some ways, in that people will be together, but people must have control over their own environment and destinies. They must be able to see whether other properties can be secured where they can be close and keep their ties without falling into seriously overcrowded and underserviced conditions. There is an ongoing discussion. It is not one that we wait to start until someone gets married and pulls a caravan in. It is not easy, but we have noticed something. There is a buy and renew scheme for individual or separate plots in rural areas. We find that brilliant

because Travellers are saying that they can buy something that is dilapidated, pull down money and do it up. If they can get three homes that are within a certain radius, some families tell us that they would rather have that. There is an assumption that everyone wants to live on top of one another. They usually do not. Ms Casey might contradict me, but I believe that has been our experience to date.

Ms Casey might discuss how we are purchasing houses in Limerick, Kerry and so forth.

Ms Bridgie Casey: We are working with a number of local authorities across the board. In Carlow, we have purchased four properties. Three already have tenants. Over the next two weeks, we will have another property under Cena's name. We did not draw that money down from the Traveller-specific accommodation funding, but from the CAS. We work with families. As Mr. Dillon mentioned, there is not one, two or three meetings with each family. We have a number of meetings where we sit down Traveller to Traveller and look to identify areas where that family would be happy to be accommodated in the long term. We have seen Travellers for whom being accommodated on housing estates and so forth did not work and they ended up back on the roadside with nothing.

We have a close relationship with Carlow County Council and we are working through a process. We have identified a number of families to work with them. Not every Traveller wants to live in Traveller-specific accommodation. We have to be aware of that. I work with and talk to Travellers on the ground in a number of areas. Some would like Traveller-specific accommodation but many are moving away from it. Is it because, despite living in group housing schemes or on halting sites being their desire, the accommodation they are living in there is in such a horrible condition that they have no choice but to move out?

We are a nomadic people. In the 1960s, we were constantly on the road and so forth. We were forced into cities, to be honest, and that has caused a large number of problems for us as a community. Often, Travellers want the focus to be on the cultural side rather than the city side. It gives them more freedom than they have in a city as well as more space for a towing trailer or horse. They understand that there is legislation and that they must abide by the law, but it is more open for them and some of them feel like they belong there more than they do within a city's boundaries.

We are working with Kildare County Council, Tralee and Limerick. Mr. Dillon's area of work is the development of relationships with local authorities in building and thinking and talking about Traveller-specific accommodation while my area of work is working with families on the ground on trying to purchase houses.

There is a particular area where we are facing discrimination. I will not name the area. We have a good relationship with the local authority but, unfortunately, the auctioneers' doors are shut to us. Instead, we are working privately to get families homes in the area, but it is sad that we have to experience such a high level of discrimination that people do not want a Traveller at their doors, in their areas, on their side of the town, on their side of the countryside, etc. There are many issues in that regard.

Cena is progressing, we have a very strong board and our directors are committed to the organisation and have driven it. It is very much an organisation that is led by the Traveller community. Travellers coming together in an organisation and doing this work for themselves has never been done before. At the end of the day, we are the experts in Traveller accommodation. If someone went out and bought a car for me, I might not want it. What we are doing is differ-

ent from other people thinking what might be good for Travellers, where they should live and how they should live.

Our culture and way of life are denied us daily. Through the TAPs, the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act and so forth, the State did a good job of assimilating us into the community and took away our rights and our identity as an ethnic minority in society. We cannot practise our way of life today in relation to being nomadic. That is a big part of who we are. We do not have the freedom to be the ethnic minority that we are in Irish society. There is a lot of work to do here with Cena. I am confident that we can deliver, but we can only deliver with my people and community. They will tell us how this is done and we need to listen as an organisation. Most of all, Travellers have to listen to Travellers. This is how we will deliver.

Deputy Joan Collins: I am a strong believer in the motto, nothing about you without you. That is where I support the Cena project. It is brilliant from that point of view. I thank Ms Casey.

Ms Bridgie Casey: The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications is very supportive of Cena going forward as an organisation. I much appreciate that support. The Housing Agency has also been very supportive. It has provided funding for my colleague, Mr. Dillon, in relation to the work he does on a day-to-day basis.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I welcome all of the guests. It is exciting to hear about Cena and the work it has been doing. It will change the face of Traveller accommodation, not only the work Cena is doing to develop housing but also its knock-on effect on other people and agencies who will see that this is how it can and should be done.

I am struck by a couple of issues. We talk about horses quite a lot and I feel it is a code word for racism and discrimination. In my short time on Galway City Council, that was my experience. It is used to avoid Travellers having their cultural identity acknowledged.

That brings me to the issue that Cena is not only providing housing but an environment around it. In putting in place supports for animal care around its housing, is Cena finding that there is kickback from other communities adjoining it? That is obviously not right but I would like to know if it is happening so that it can be addressed.

Is Cena getting funding and support for all of the other work it does over and above what other AHBs do, for example, providing apprenticeships? It is clear that is also putting in place mental health supports because all those it deals with come from a background where they will know people who have health issues or something in their family. What kind of supports, financial and otherwise, is it getting?

Ms Fitzgerald referred to preventing people from becoming homeless. I was on a public participation network, PPN, in the housing committee for a couple of years before becoming a councillor and that was a big issue for us. The Simon Communities were also represented on that committee. Homelessness was ramping up at the time and has become even more extreme, with couch-surfing and so on. What is Cena doing in concrete terms to address that issue? It covers many hidden homeless people who are inaccessible to local authorities unless they are on the ground.

Mr. Brian Dillon: We have started to learn about horses and animals. It would be a long time before I would learn all that Travellers know about horses. Ms Casey and her family know a lot more than I do. On my side, I would say the bigger issue here is the kind of model that we

are convinced works around horses. In terms of an analysis, as Ms Casey said, it is a culture that has been decimated, criminalised and had all sorts of other things done to it by Irish society. One of the last things I would see as a target for destruction are horses. That is where much of that negative sentiment that Senator Pauline O'Reilly spoke about comes from.

We are firmly convinced that any kind of approach to the horse situation cannot be around some symbolic notion. An example of a symbolic notion would be the concept of a horse project where people say we should build a couple of stables and is that not lovely. There is not much more to that than consigning horses to a museum and we can all walk past, look at them and be happy. That is not what we are about in Cena. We are about preserving horses as a living part of people's culture. This has a very serious link to the question of mental health. It is not an overstatement to say that there are men who have taken their own lives in the Traveller community because of what has been done to their horses.

The model we look at is self-organisation. We are looking at how people can form associations, have membership in their own associations and begin to promote that. That is the only way forward. It is slow. As to whether there is opposition, absolutely there is, because so many mixed messages are put forward in the media as if every Traveller will race down the N4. That could not be further from the truth when you look at children growing up and the relationship they have with their horses.

There is a lot of work to be done on horses. I would say we are only starting. My thinking is that we probably will hit opposition. We have not hit it yet because we have been very careful. We work a lot with neighbours. That is what we do all the time. We point out that nobody will be killed or seriously injured if people recognise each other's diversity. That is the only way we would see of tackling this. The first is to have self-organisation and the second is to try to build mutual respect.

On the other question, we do not get any other money for any of the other stuff. In a sense, we are not chasing it. We know we have to grow with a Traveller base. We have to build skills in the Traveller community at the same time as we are growing. There is only so much we can take on. The worst thing we could do is access money just to do a programme and then suddenly find that we have lost our way. At the heart of Cena is to have Travellers driving it. That is how I would see that issue. I do not know what Ms Casey thinks about the question on horses.

Ms Bridgie Casey: Horses have been a part of Traveller rights for decades. It means a lot to Travellers to keep their horses and culture. We agree it is difficult in many areas in the city to keep horses. What Cena does when we are working with and talking to Travellers face to face on the ground and trying to identify Traveller accommodation needs for them is ask if they want to live in a house. If they do, we say that it could be difficult and they cannot keep their horses. It is not allowed and is against the regulations. We are trying to build this capacity to have Travellers keep horses but it will take time. Travellers who will be housed in the countryside may have more options to embrace and hold onto their culture than those who are housed in the cities.

The employment rate is very low in the Traveller community. The horse means a lot to Travellers because it occupies their minds on a daily basis. It is also good for mental health. Research in the Netherlands shows that having children with ADHD or learning difficulties work with horses helps a lot. As a result of the lack of employment, horses have been involved in our life for generations. As to losing that, the suicide rate is not all about drugs or alcohol because mental health is a big issue, so it is important that we can hold onto our horses and our

culture. Not every Traveller man or woman likes horses or wants them, but there are many who do want them. They feel threatened if they have to give up their way of life to become a settled person and that they cannot be a Traveller.

Vice Chairman: Thank you. Has the Senator any other questions?

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I had a question for Ms Fitzgerald and I have just put a message into the message feed to say that I have gone off camera. I do not mean any offence by that, but I have to move to the Seanad Chamber now. However, I am still listening in to the responses.

Ms Andrea Fitzgerald: To address the most concrete steps we have taken towards our prevention piece, we have recognised over the past number of years that the number of referrals not only in Galway city but also in County Galway have increased year-on-year. A large part of the income we get through our fundraising efforts goes towards our prevention service. We provide the prevention service in Galway city and county through a specific youth service programme as well. That is the most important concrete step we have taken. We have recognised it and we have seen there is a need for the service across the city and county.

To explain what our prevention service looks like, it can vary from very short pieces of prevention work with an individual to quite medium-term to long-term pieces of prevention. We have also recognised that there is a big difference between rural homelessness and urban homelessness. Our experience in the rural piece is that, yes, there is an awful amount of hidden homelessness, with overcrowding, and those people are reaching out to us because we have a presence in counties Galway, Roscommon and Mayo. The work can vary from assisting people with practical tasks, such as housing applications and flagging them with the local authorities, to much more longer-term work if the cases are more complex.

I should point out that part of prevention is sometimes not as simple as just finding a home for an individual or a family and making that happen. Sometimes it requires us to stay engaged with that particular household for a period afterwards to ensure they are sustained successfully in their home. As I said, we meet people in a very client-centred way, so each case is different. Each individual has his or her own set of strengths and some individuals come with significant challenges, so we identify that quite early. The most concrete step we have taken in the prevention piece is the investment in and the rolling out of that service across the region.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I thank the witnesses.

Deputy David Stanton: I welcome our guests. We all know the fantastic work the Simon Communities do. It is just amazing. We had an open day across the road and it was great to see the work it does. Mr. Dillon has brought this to a new level today and I congratulate him and Ms Casey on what they have been doing. I do not think I have heard so much common sense in a long time. I am aware of the Traveller Mediation Service, the work it does and how successful it is. Again, it is back to what the witness said - a Traveller service run by Travellers for Travellers. It works extremely well. I have worked with the service over the years and I find it extraordinary. The analysis of the cultural appropriateness and the cultural housing is spot on.

The importance of animals was mentioned, and we all are aware of that. I am sure the witnesses are aware of the horse project in Castlerea Prison. Unfortunately, there are 400 Travellers in prison at present and we established a horse project in Castlerea whereby young Travellers can be trained in animal husbandry and get jobs afterwards. They get qualified through the Prison Service. Mr. Jonathan Irwin was involved in setting that up as well. It is very successful.

I am also aware of the horse project in Tullamore, and I met older Travellers there who said that they lived for their horses. Without the horses they would certainly have been in serious trouble with their mental health and so forth. We understand that. I also understand the point, and Ms Casey mentioned this as well, about having animals on housing estates and telling Travellers that they must be on a housing estate but they cannot have a horse or a dog or a shed, whereas people in the countryside have a shed. Everybody in the countryside has a shed, very often quite large sheds, and they have their animals as well. That is very important.

Mr. Dillon has a number of feasibility studies starting and a number of them completed. Can he comment on what is involved in that and, perhaps, tell us a little about them? What is the outcome, how are they done, who does them and why does he do them? There are 473 approved housing bodies in the country and Cena is one of them. It is a small one and is not long in existence. What type of relationship does it have with the other AHBs? There are some big and long-established ones.

We have talked a great deal about discrimination. Mr. Dillon has broken down very well for the committee the cultural appropriateness of housing and what it all means. However, could he talk about the genesis of discrimination? Where does it come from? I know that is a difficult question. We know there is overt racism, and I encountered that in the previous job I had. I encountered people who were strongly racist. That was their thing, and they were avowed and self-proclaimed racists. However, often one would find what one might call ordinary people being quite fearful when they hear that a Traveller might be housed close by. Is that discrimination or is there a lack of information, education and familiarity? Is there more going on here? We all bandy the word "discrimination" about, without breaking it down in respect of what its genesis is and where it comes from. Without knowing the genesis of it, we really cannot deal with it. Perhaps we could deal with it better if we know its genesis. That is another question. I guess local authorities need guidance as well and the type of training and information that the witnesses have given us today, and this is only a short meeting.

I was also interested to hear about the TLOs. Their role is massively important. I know that other AHBs have liaison officers and they do great work. They can head off problems before they arise. They identify them when they are small, before they get big. Often one will find that when liaison officers are involved in any housing estate, there are no problems because they can get involved early.

I apologise for having so many questions, but they are the things that arise. However, well done and congratulations. I wish the witnesses well in the work they are doing. It is very good. It is one of the best presentations I have heard in a long time.

Mr. Brian Dillon: They are very important questions. I do not know if I can answer on the origins of discrimination, but I can give my opinion.

On feasibility studies, basically we are calling on them because we want to go beyond the notion of needs assessment. Needs assessment has been a one-dimensional, one-sided process up to now. We will typically connect with one of the local authorities. We will say there is a group of families and we want to look at what the future solutions are for these families. We enter into the process, and that is an important word to use because it is a process of engagement. Our people are trained to liaise and to talk to people about their future accommodation needs, almost giving them the space to look at what the future is. We write up our report very carefully. We always find that, among most people and in most places we go, there is an assumption that everybody wants to be in the location. Sometimes around half may not want to be. Families

tells us that. Many of the Travellers we work with, including even younger Travellers, are shocked when they find out that nobody ever asks people a question in this regard. It takes a while and we go backwards and forwards. We write up the results. We examine the possibilities and ask whether there is land anywhere else. We ask what the properties are like beyond that. Sometimes people will have wanted, maybe for 20 years, to go across county boundaries, for example. This means that we start with one local authority and then negotiate with another to see how the matter can be solved. We have done that for perhaps six or seven counties now – I cannot remember the precise number. Some of this work will result in action for us. The five homes we are building in Galway city started out with a feasibility study because we found that the solution coming forward was acceptable to the local authority. Regarding another three, we are waiting to hear whether the solutions are acceptable to the local authority. If not – this is an important point for us – we will not remain involved. We would not want to be.

People were talking about money earlier. If there is €2 million to be drawn down to do a site up, we will not do it because we know for a fact that if you do not get the mixture right in respect of people who want to live with one another and effect long-term solutions, an issue arises. I am nearly confident we will now build at one of the sites in Carlow. We will definitely build in Kerry, outside Killarney. We are building in Galway and we have built in Tullamore. It is all based on an agreement with the relevant local authority to the effect that this is possible. As members know, the local authority has to sign off on our applications for capital assistance scheme money. We ask the local authority to pay for the feasibility study. It is not a lot of money. It is €5,000 or €6,000 but you would be surprised at the number of local authorities that say they do not have it. The Department helps us.

On relationships with other approved housing bodies, an important initiative for us involves the Department supporting us to take on two major projects. Each will have a dedicated worker who will be funded. One aspect involves working with one local authority area and then expanding – in other words, bringing the Cena model into one local authority area and then engaging seriously with all local authorities on how the assessment process should and can be engaged in. The scope for influence in this regard is considerable, as I am sure members will agree. The other aspect involves working across approved housing bodies. We do not want to stop with the bigger ones. We believe there is an amazing number of examples for Cena. The Peter McVerry Trust has very interesting apprenticeship programmes. We are going to learn an awful lot but we believe we will be able to employ the Cena model as well. This was one of the main recommendations of the expert review group. We are very confident that the relationships can be developed.

I agree that the tenant liaison officers are critical. There is total agreement among the Cena board members and staff that this is the future of the organisation. We have to have people trained who will consistently and constantly work with their own communities to develop and maintain self-determination. This is what they are trained to do. We have had brilliant people so far. There is a serious amount of enthusiasm to join us. It is a hard slog for the staff, however, because they have a lot to learn. It was said that other approved housing bodies have tenant liaison officers. We must not underestimate the amount of work of tenant liaison officers for Cena. We have already spoken today about the legacy of neglect in the sector. We are not just dealing with homes; we are also dealing with mental health issues and other issues regarding which people are connecting with services, such as addiction. Our tenant liaison officers have to bear in mind the full picture in connecting people. In addition, they need a serious set of community relations skills to build the respect required. The officers sometimes do as much work in the settled community as in the Traveller community. Typically, 14 social houses will

be built as we build our four. There has to be mutual respect.

On the question on where discrimination comes from, one could get into a serious row. I do not know whether Ms Casey-----

Vice Chairman: Maybe it is best to avoid it.

Mr. Brian Dillon: For me, it began with Cromwell. I am a firm believer that there was a separation of settled people and Travellers during the time of the Cromwellian plantation and that Travellers saw themselves as the guardians of real Irish culture. A lot of this is documented. All the evidence shows that becoming nomadic, rather than enslaved, was a big driving force. With the penal laws, there was obviously a connection with religion, language and the music. The horses kept the community and nomadism alive. That is only my opinion. I am very much aware that if the question were asked more widely, 20 different opinions would be got, from different Travellers and everyone else. My view explains a lot about a fracture that is very deep in Irish society. It has to be linked to some period in history.

I do not know whether Ms Casey is still present to throw in her tuppence worth. I know there are many people writing theses on this subject. I absolutely agree that the issue as to where the discrimination originated has to be tackled and considered clearly.

Deputy David Stanton: I have three points. I thank Mr. Dillon for his analysis. He is spot on. When I was talking about discrimination, I was not referring to its genesis alone; I was more interested in why people discriminate today and why they feel fearful of a Traveller moving in next door or down the road. Where is that coming from? It is all very fine to say there is discrimination and so forth but unless we tackle why people act as they do in the first place, we will not address it. Are people fearful? Is there ignorance? Is there a lack of information? Is there something else going on? Mr. Dillon said there are theses being written on the subject, which is good to know.

I draw the witnesses' attention to the Open Doors initiative, which was set up recently to help people to gain and find pathways to employment. If the witnesses have not heard of the initiative, it might be useful to link with those concerned. They would have the same philosophy as the witnesses. The Irish Association for Social Inclusion Opportunities, IASIO, helps people to gain employment and offers support to people after they leave prison. I have a special interest in ensuring people who leave prison do not go back in again and instead find a pathway to fulfilment, for want of a better way of putting it.

I was a Minister of State for a bit but not anymore. I just want to let the delegates know in case colleagues feel it matters. That is just a small point. I thank the delegates for their time. The discussion has been very interesting.

Vice Chairman: I always welcomed the setting up of Cena. It was a major step. One of the challenges is that when things are done, people who are less well off in society, or more at its margins, are not involved in making them happen. There is not the psychological ownership there should be. That is very important to most people, whether settled or Travellers. I really thought that the setting up of Cena would lead to that psychological ownership and involvement that has been missing for so long. It is fair to say that we are seeing the same pattern as is seen with indigenous communities throughout the world. The evidence is that they are marginalised from involvement in decision-making. I wish Cena all the best.

That raises another issue I would like to tease out. The witnesses seem to be indicating that

they can do work not related to CAS, in other words, the building of houses and so on, without funding. Many other similar bodies would have their hands out saying that they need funding to do liaison and community work. Will the witnesses give a short explanation of this? Is it the case that they feel that, if they got more funding, they might lose autonomy, freedom or whatever?

The point that has been highlighted as to who decides what accommodation is appropriate to Travellers is key. Generally with social housing, including Traveller-specific accommodation but also other social housing, I have found over the years that the end users, those who will have to live in the properties, are rarely asked. I believe that leads to many of the problems we have. I am glad that issue was teased out. I hope the witnesses become world leaders in demonstrating best practice, which includes involving people in design, management and construction.

Mr. Dillion mentioned something I was taken with. He mentioned that he would love to get Traveller contractors. Has any thought been given as to how that might be realisable in light of public tendering processes and so on? Could it be put in the contracts or so on? I am interested in that because if it could be achieved, it would be another step towards that psychological ownership and it would give employment to people from the Traveller community.

One of the issues that constantly puzzles me relates to the hierarchy of choices people will make. My experience of people is that people in desperate situations will normally take the choice they believe will give them the quickest answer even if that answer is less than ideal. They will take a house with HAP, not because they believe HAP is a good system but because it is the only house available. They will then look for a transfer and take a voluntary house, a local authority house or Traveller-specific accommodation but I often feel they take whichever they think they are going to get. Their preference is the one they will get the fastest because they have to get housed. A part of being homeless is having little choice. Does Ms Fitzgerald have any views on how many of the so-called choices people make are determined not by their real preferences but by what they feel is the best way to progress their desperate situations?

One issue we have not touched on is transient halting sites. I address this to the Cena representatives. Does Cena see itself having any role in working with Government to provide a national network of transient halting sites on a planned basis? I refer to a network, not built county council by county council, but nationally. These sites would be in the areas the Travellers themselves would like to travel to. Have there been any thoughts on that?

I will make a quick final comment. The replies can be short and focused. Has the difficulty in getting planning permission either through Part 8 or through the normal planning process, which allows for objections, been a major barrier to progressing projects in the Cena's experience? I would be interested in quick comments on those points before we do one final round to see if any Deputies or Senators have further questions or if the contributors want to do a final wrap-up.

Mr. Brian Dillon: There are probably three or four points there addressed to us. I will start with the Vice Chair's question on whether funding would threaten our autonomy. I do not believe so as we are being very careful to build our own capacity as we progress. We are conscious that this capacity and any kind of potential we have depends totally on the extent to which we can build what might be called a workforce. That is what we are building - a Traveller workforce that understands this and is able to deliver it. As regards overstretching ourselves and asking whether we can look at education processes and so on, right now, we are involved in a learning process to see how we can progress. We are working to a clear growth plan. We see

that as something that is part of our future expansion. We are trying to expand on the accommodation bit first. It is probably just a strategic issue for now.

Vice Chairman: We will prepare a report at the end of this process. We hear what Mr. Dillon is saying clearly but should we make provision for those possibilities as the organisation grows and as support is required?

Mr. Brian Dillon: I totally agree. Ms Casey said earlier that we have total support from the Department. I totally accept that. The Department is coming to us with those same questions and asking whether we need support in different areas. From the point of view of the Vice Chairman's conclusion, it is our intention and ambition to grow into these areas. We would like to think that we will get that support when that happens. I just cannot be very specific about it now.

It relates a wee bit to what the Deputy said about the transient sites. We have had that discussion in depth with the Department. We have teased out a preliminary proposal around transient sites. We are working on that as an ongoing proposal but it has led to interesting and useful conversations within the Traveller community. This begins with the realistic statement that the reason transience or nomadism worked was that there was a sophisticated network between Travellers and Traveller families, which determined who went where and that was respected. Timing was also involved. I do not want to be flippant about it but can that nomadism be magically recreated three or four generations later? It is not that simple. We put forward a proposal for a pilot programme but subsequently we thought, and have become convinced, that we should start with a serious discussion within the Traveller community about what that would look like. We will be going back to the Department with that proposal. We have to discuss how to build the infrastructure, which has been decimated. When nomadism is criminalised, the whole structure in which it operates is decimated. It is not easy to build that up again. A lot more thought is needed. We should have serious discussion and engagement with the Traveller community, and with all those who have an interest in that community, over the next year or so.

The mediation service was mentioned earlier. We work closely with that service as well. We must be clear that there are differences between families and between everything else. We will be going back with a proposal as to how we go forward with that, and we will begin with a serious engagement with Travellers. We think that will result in a pilot which we can get up and running. Cena seems to be open to doing that and leading on it.

On contracting, bigger and smaller contracts are involved. Many members would be more familiar with the procurement procedures and other aspects involved with such contracts. In the bigger procurement contracts for major building projects, a detailed procedure must be followed and there are similar compliance requirements, etc. That does not mean that we do not encourage contractors who are Travellers. Believe it or not, there are Traveller contractors and developers. As with any other walk of life, the discrimination prevalent in Irish society is so desperate that these people do not declare themselves to be Travellers. They would not get work if they did. We are carefully working our way through that. We are not trying to fix any contracts but to make the people we are getting to know aware of these contracts and encourage them to apply for them. That is on the higher level. On the lower level, we have much more control. Nearly every property we purchase will require work to be done to it. Some of it is basically unskilled work, like landscaping and so forth, and in those situations we immediately talk to Travellers who are able to come and do that work. We want to build on that kind of involvement in projects. We are hopeful and optimistic that we can make big inroads into employment as well.

The last query concerned planning permission. Ms Casey mentioned auctioneers. That is the front line in respect of local opposition. We are having that experience. There was an example in the Vice Chairman's constituency, in Galway city, where we had a pilot project that was shot down because of local opposition. Interestingly, however, we are now building five homes in Galway city where we were able to get around that problem. What is required is to take the problem on. Bit by bit, we want to face down such opposition.

To return to the earlier discussion about discrimination, our feeling in that regard is that one of the best weapons in the longer term is to highlight examples that have been successful. The development in Galway city is an outstanding example of what needs to happen. By the way, one of the Travellers there told us to look up the word "Rahoonery" in the dictionary. I do not know if the Vice Chairman is aware of the word but it means vile anti-Traveller sentiment which was translated into vigilantism. It is associated with the Rahoon area in Galway. We are building these five homes in exactly the location where the term originated and we are calling the development Boreen na Saoirse, on the advice of the Traveller man we are working with there to build it. That is a nice little example of how we can overcome such opposition. It is a good example and we want to make it an example of good practice in this area.

We get around these problems step by step. We have noticed that when people are homed in rural areas and people start meeting each other. I am answering that question in a roundabout way, although the query started with the subject of planning permission. However, we get such problems everywhere and we will fight them one by one.

Ms Andrea Fitzgerald: On the Vice Chairman's question on whether our people are able to access their preferences or if they have a choice, broadly, those people who find themselves in a homelessness crisis probably do not end up housed where they would prefer to live. On the work we do across the region, much depends on when people are referred to us. We have had some good examples of what is possible if we have time to work with people. If people come to us and flag that they have received a notice to quit at an early point in the process, that gives us scope to get some real work done. We are able to build a relationship with the individuals concerned and with whatever local authority is involved and present the case with a human face and the human story behind it. If Covid-19 has taught us one thing, it is that we were able to pull off unbelievable results in the face of a pandemic when we all worked collaboratively together. Many positive results came from doing that.

Much hinges on what is going on and what part of a journey people are on in determining whether they end up being accommodated in the homes they wish to be in. We have had some good outcomes when people come to us in the earlier part of their journey. A large part of our work is constant collaboration with the local authorities. On the other hand, if people are already out of their homes when they come to us and we cannot access something for them in a timely manner, they will probably have to go through the staircase model of services for some time. The answer is individual in each case. Broadly, however, when people are in a serious crisis, they will, as the Vice Chairman said, take whatever option will get them out of it quickest.

Vice Chairman: Deputies Joan Collins and Mitchell are the only two Deputies still logged in. There are meetings all around the House.

Deputy Joan Collins: I was interested in what Mr. Dillon was saying about employment that might be attached to Cena projects over time. Where can people go to link in with the organisation regarding potential work? I would like some information on that because I know

people who want to get work, have a van and are keen. It would be good to be able to point them in the right direction for potential future opportunities.

Mr. Brian Dillon: That is a good point. A strong member of the Cena board, a sister of Ms Casey, is beginning to set up what was suggested by the Deputy, that is, a register of skills where people can sign up to be aware of opportunities. Her concept is wider than that and it would include other opportunities that might arise outside of Cena projects. First and foremost, it would be good for Travellers to know even about small bits and pieces of work that are coming up. That is exactly what she has in her mind to do and we are hoping it will happen.

In the meantime, I do not think any hassle is associated with passing on our details in this regard. We get those kinds of phone calls every day. It is more Ms Casey than me, because Travellers will share information between each other. We will be delighted to hear from people and to know that they are interested. Obviously, this whole idea is about not promising people the earth. Many false promises have been made to people already and the last thing we want to do is to add to them. The intention behind our idea is to allow us to say clearly where we are going and if something is coming up, that we can genuinely give people the guarantee that they will be on the list for consideration. That is about as much as we can say about this potential undertaking right now. It could be a useful starting point. It is under way and could be a useful starting point.

Vice Chairman: Unless other Deputies or Senators wish to make further contributions, I thank our contributors today. It has been a good session and we have learned a great deal. The important thing for us now is to take on board what has been said. We will write a report at the end of this. We hope that we will then able to press the Oireachtas for action on our recommendations. We want our contributors to understand this as part of a process that is to lead to results that we hope will improve the lives of Traveller people and make sure they get fair play in society.

Unless there is any other matter, we will conclude. Our next meeting is at 3 p.m. on Tuesday, 12 October 2021. It will be a joint meeting with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, at which we will continue our examination of access to housing and accommodation, including Traveller-specific accommodation. At the conclusion of that meeting the committee will adjourn until Thursday, 21 October 2021 for a private session at 11.30 a.m. and a public session at 1.30 p.m., when we further consider Travellers in prison.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.41 p.m. until 3 p.m. on Tuesday, 12 October 2021.