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, 22 Bealtaine 2025

Thursday, 22 May 2025

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
John Connolly,	Maria Byrne,
Dessie Ellis,	Eileen Flynn,
Tony McCormack,	Malcolm Noonan,
Séamus McGrath,	Joe O'Reilly,
Naoise Ó Muirí,	Anne Rabbitte.
Maurice Quinlivan,	
Pádraig Rice,	
Barry Ward.	

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

Business of Joint Committee

An Cathaoirleach: No apologies have been received. Before we proceed, I have a few housekeeping matters to go through as follows. In accordance with Standing Orders, I wish to make the following declaration:

> I do solemnly declare that I will duly and faithfully, and to the best of my knowledge and ability, execute the office of Cathaoirleach of the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community without fear or favour, apply the rules as laid down by the House in an impartial and fair manner, maintain order and uphold the rights and privileges of members in accordance with the Constitution and Standing Orders.

I remind members of the constitutional requirement that in order to participate in public meetings, members must be physically present within the confines of Leinster House complex. Members of the committee attending remotely must do so from within the precincts of Leinster House. This is due to the constitutional requirement that in order to participate in public meetings, members must be physically present within the confines of the place where the Parliament has chosen to sit. In this regard, I ask any members participating via MS Teams that prior to making a contribution to the meeting, they confirm they are on the grounds of Leinster House campus.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, I will direct them to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative they comply with any such direction.

Good afternoon. I am delighted and honoured to have been appointed Cathaoirleach of the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community. I welcome all members of the committee. I look forward to working with them all in a genuine spirit of partnership and co-operation in addressing the many issues and challenges involved in the subject of the committee. I sincerely mean that. We will do the work as a collective. I hope that over the coming years we will be able to identify and work on the various issues affecting the Traveller community and bring some issues to the table that will improve and enhance the lives of the Travelling community across the country. Do any members wish to comment? I call on Senator Rabbitte.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I wish the Chair the best in his role. I look forward to working with him in an open and transparent way. I thank the secretariat for the documents it presented to us. It is my first time to be a member of this committee. I look forward to working with everybody in a collegial fashion to put the person and their groups at the centre and to hear their lived experiences throughout.

An Cathaoirleach: Thank you, Senator Rabbitte.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I congratulate the Chair. I look forward to working with everyone. I am not sure whether we will be meeting every Thursday. Will that be the pattern from here on or has it been set? It is crucial to find out which days we will meet on, how often and what times we will be dealing with. Everyone has commitments and is trying to sort them out.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Deputy Ellis. We will discuss that prior to the conclusion.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Like everybody else, I wish the Chair well in his stewardship of this committee for the term of this Government. I am a first-time TD from the constituency of Offaly. There are a lot of Travellers in the constituency and they have their issues. I worked with them previously as chairman of the local Traveller accommodation committee. I look forward to working with everybody here to try to resolve the issues facing Travellers.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Deputy McCormack.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I congratulate the Cathaoirleach on his appointment. I look forward to working with everybody on the committee for the lifetime of this Oireachtas on the key issues affecting Travellers and with the Chair.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Deputy.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I congratulate the Chair and wish him well in his role. I have no doubt he will do an outstanding job. I look forward to working with him and all colleagues. I had the privilege of being on the previous committee and I thought it was very good. We did our best, specifically in the sphere of heightening awareness and accountability among local authorities. I retrospectively salute my colleague Senator Flynn for the work she did as Chair.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator.

Senator Maria Byrne: I congratulate the Cathaoirleach and wish him well. I look forward to working with the committee in a productive manner. When I was on the council, I sat on the Traveller committee for ten years. We did a lot of good work alongside people across the city. I look forward to working with everyone involved in this committee and all witnesses.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator. Before I call on Senator Flynn, I join Senator O'Reilly and, I know, the rest of the committee in saluting, congratulating and thanking Senator Flynn for her excellent work in the role of Cathaoirleach in the previous term. I look forward to working with her in the coming years.

Senator Eileen Flynn: I thank the Cathaoirleach. I would first like to address the elephant in the room. I am not a member of a political party; I am an Independent Senator. I happen to be from the Traveller community. I know this was not a committee that was fought for, if you will, in the conversations around committees. I am accountable to members of the Traveller community. While I wish the Cathaoirleach well in his role and look forward to working with him, I hope we can from this day be more positive. I emailed Deputy Duncan Smith for three weeks and it was unfortunate that he did not get back to me. When he did, he sent me a one-liner saying that Deputy Lawlor is the Chairperson of the committee and that, therefore, I should pick it up with him. I hope that from today we can work well together. I hope to be a crutch for the Chair and to give him the best advice I can as a member of the Traveller community. I genuinely wish him every success. I hope to God we can have better communications from today than those in the past. This is about 40,000 people in Ireland who are not treated equally. We also have to include the Roma community in this committee. That will be really important. It is important I say this today because my political party is ordinary people of Irish society and members of the Traveller community.

Again, I wish the Cathaoirleach well and I know many colleagues wish him well. I look forward to being a crutch and working hard in this committee. We know the inequalities. We know from the previous committees and from decades past the inequalities that Travellers face. One of our roles in this committee could be holding the Government to account for implemen-

tation.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I join other members in wishing Deputy Lawlor well in his role as Cathaoirleach. I also commend Eileen Flynn on all of her work over many years of activism on these issues. It is very important that we centre in our work the voice of Travellers, hear their experience and listen to Traveller organisations. There are very serious human rights issues in housing, health - mental health in particular - justice and education. It is crucial we address some of these issues and make progress for the thousands of Travellers in this country. I look forward to playing my part in that work.

Deputy John Connolly: I wish the Cathaoirleach well and every success in his role. I have no doubt every member will take a collaborative and collegial approach. I can certainly guarantee I will do so. Similar to my colleague, Deputy McCormack, I was a member of the local Traveller accommodation consultative committee in Galway City Council for two terms. As a school principal, I worked with many families from the Travelling community. I look forward to participating and playing my part in enhancing health outcomes for members of the Travelling community and examining the levels of educational participation among members of the Travelling community. The accommodation issue is also significant, particularly in urban settings. I wish the Cathaoirleach well and I look forward to participating in the committee.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Like the other members, I with the Cathaoirleach the best and congratulate him on his appointment. I look forward to working with all members, including Senator Flynn who did stellar work in this previous committee in the previous Dáil. It is a great privilege for the Travelling community to have a Traveller Senator elected again to Seanad Éireann. While we have to focus on the challenges facing the Travelling community, it is important too that we look towards where the opportunities lie in celebrating Traveller culture. I think particularly of music, song, language, craft and all of that. One of the elements of breaking down barriers has to be that celebration of Traveller culture. We had a fantastic event in Kilkenny on Monday to celebrate Traveller Pride Week 2025. During my time as Minister of State, I put funding in place for the Heritage Council to appoint a heritage officer whose dedicated role was to work with the Traveller and Roma communities and other minorities. One of the heritage week events was dedicated specifically towards that. There are opportunities here as well. There is no doubt that there has been progress in Traveller welfare, education and health over recent years but it is not fast enough. I suggest this committee also focus on opportunities to celebrate Traveller culture. Again, I look forward to working with everyone in the years ahead.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I join the other members in congratulating Deputy Lawlor on taking up the position of Cathaoirleach. I am glad to be a member of this committee. I was, like other members, previously a member of a local authority committee so I have some experience in that respect. The one takeaway I have from that is the importance of having good engagement with the Traveller community. We are not necessarily here to be a voice for Travellers. We need them to be a voice for themselves. We are fortunate to have Senator Flynn with us but we need to be broader than that as we cannot entirely rely on her to be that voice either. Critically, this is about engagement, which is the one takeaway I have from my time on the local authority committee. I hope we can do that as a committee. I will work co-operatively and collegially with all members to try to progress the key issues facing the Traveller community.

Deputy Barry Ward: I wish the Cathaoirleach the best of luck in his new role. I was not a member of this committee in the previous Oireachtas but Senator Flynn, who was a colleague of mine in the Seanad, was good enough to invite me to some of the meetings and events the

committee held. This committee has huge potential. I am looking forward to working with the Cathaoirleach and other colleagues on developing a work plan that will deliver some insight and information but also some progress on a lot of issues that have to be dealt with.

An Cathaoirleach: As members will be aware, a committee may choose to elect a Leas-Chathaoirleach who can perform the duties and exercise the authority of the Cathaoirleach in his or her absence. I propose requesting nominations for the position of Leas-Chathaoirleach. Members may wish to consult one another and send nominations to the clerk by Monday, 26 May 2025. Ideally, the election of Leas-Chathaoirleach will take place at the meeting on Thursday, 29 May 2025, although I appreciate Deputy Ellis has queried that time. We will put that decision in stone when we discuss the timings. Is that agreed? Agreed. We will now go into private session to discuss some housekeeping matters.

The joint committee went into private session at 12.46 p.m and adjourned at 1.06 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Thursday, 29 May 2025.