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, 18 Meán Fómhair 2025

Thursday, 18 September 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**
Dessie Ellis,	Malcolm Noonan,
Naoise Ó Muirí,	Joe O'Reilly.
Pádraig Rice.	

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

The joint committee met in private session until 12.47 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.47 p.m. and resumed in public session at 12.49 p.m.

Implementation of National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II and Action Plan 2024-2026: Department of Children, Disability and Equality

An Cathaoirleach: Apologies have been received from Senator Byrne and Deputy Quinlivan. Everyone is very welcome. I ask anyone who is attending remotely to mute themselves when not contributing in order that we do not pick up any background noise or feedback. As usual, I remind all those in attendance to ensure their mobile phones - I include mine in this - are on silent mode or switched off. Members attending remotely are reminded of their constitutional requirement that in order to participate in public meetings they must be physically present within the confines of the Leinster House complex.

As the witnesses are within the precincts of Leinster House, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentation they make to the committee. This means that they have an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything they say at the meeting. However, they are expected not to abuse this privilege, and it is my duty as Cathaoirleach to ensure that this privilege is not abused. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or entity outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

On the agenda for today's meeting is an engagement with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality to discuss the implementation of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028 and Action Plan 2024-2026. I invite Ms Carol Baxter, assistant secretary, to make the Department's opening statement, following which we will proceed with a question-and-answer session.

Ms Carol Baxter: On behalf of my colleagues, Sinéad McEvoy, Conor McGinn and Patricia Ballantine, I thank the committee for the invitation to appear before it today to discuss the implementation of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028, NTRIS II, and the associated Action Plan 2024-2026. This meeting is very timely because the NTRIS II steering committee met yesterday to discuss progress on the implementation of actions under the strategy. We welcome the opportunity to outline the progress made and to reaffirm the Government’s commitment to supporting the full and equal participation of Travellers in Irish society.

As committee members are aware, NTRIS II and its associated first two-year action plan were published in July last year, following extensive consultations with Travellers and Roma representative organisations, Departments and State agencies. The Department of Children, Disability and Equality has responsibility for central co-ordination of the strategy and has oversight of the implementation of actions under NTRIS II. However, each Department takes

responsibility for developing policy and implementing initiatives in respect of areas under their remit.

Since the launch of the second strategy last July, progress has been made across all nine themes of the strategy, as reported by the Departments and State agencies leading on NTRIS II actions. Specifically, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality has progressed key developments in the initial implementation phase of the strategy, including in regard to early learning and care, and we will speak a little about this. These include the initial roll-out of the Equal Start model commenced in September 2024. Equal Start is a major new model of Government-funded supports designed to ensure that children and their families experiencing disadvantage, including Travellers, can access and meaningfully participate in early learning and childcare. Equal Start includes a suite of supports which are designed to ensure that every child and every early learning and childcare setting benefits from a continuum of supports.

A total of 17 family link workers have been appointed to support the implementation of the Traveller parenting support programme. These workers engage with Traveller parents of young children, supporting them to attend and participate in early learning and care and in school-aged childcare. Two Traveller and Roma early years advisory specialists have been appointed to focus on Traveller and Roma inclusion in early learning and care and in school-aged childcare.

One of the key commitments under NTRIS II is to achieve equality in education outcomes, and to ensure that Traveller children and young people are supported and valued in schools. In addition to supporting the Department of Education and Youth on the implementation of the Traveller and Roma education strategy, our Department has continued to provide funding for the Traveller and Roma education community development worker scheme, a targeted support scheme for Travellers in schools introduced in 2022. The education community development workers are employed by local Traveller organisations across ten locations in Ireland to enhance the learning experience and educational outcomes of Traveller children and young people and to address the challenges surrounding their participation and retention in and progression through the education system.

The Department has also focused on providing support for initiatives to promote and celebrate Traveller culture and identity. The Department provides, for instance, annual funding for Traveller Pride Week. Traveller Pride Week comprises a programme of events celebrating and recognising Traveller culture and identity in a variety of ways across the country. Every second year, the Traveller Pride Awards form a key part of the Traveller Pride celebrations to highlight and recognise individuals and groups that have made a particular contribution to the community and wider society.

The Department is also supporting the work, led by the Heritage Council, to develop a Traveller heritage strategy. It is anticipated that this strategy, which is being developed in close consultation with Traveller organisation representatives, will be completed by the end of the year. In addition, the Department supports the implementation of NTRIS II actions across a range of areas, including the Civil Service Traveller and Roma placement programme and the cultural awareness training standard.

With regard to the Civil Service Traveller and Roma placement programme, NTRIS II has a particular focus on creating employment opportunities aimed at improving employment

outcomes for Travellers. The strategy commits the State, as an employer, to increase the number of Travellers and Roma in employment in the public sector and to build a positive and inclusive workplace culture. To this end, the Department is supporting the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation and the Public Appointment Service, on the roll-out of the second iteration of the Civil Service Traveller and Roma placement programme. The recruitment campaign is under way and it is hoped that we attract a series of Traveller interns to benefit from the opportunity of seeing whether a public service job might be for them.

As part of the efforts to address the racism and discrimination faced by Travellers and Roma, the Department is working in collaboration with national Traveller and Roma organisations to develop an agreed standard for cultural awareness and anti-racism training. This standard will set a benchmark for cultural awareness and anti-racism training and will assist in ensuring that all staff across public and community sectors engage with, and deliver services to, members of the Traveller and Roma communities in a respectful, informed, accessible, and inclusive manner. The intention is to deliver public services in a culturally competent manner through a rights-based approach in line with the public sector equality and human rights duty.

On oversight and engagement, to ensure effective strategy implementation, while making sure that the widest range of voices are heard, we have put in place strong governance and engagement structures. Members of the Traveller community are represented on the NTRIS II steering committee and the related subcommittees on employment and education and on the recently established research committee. The strategy also provides for the establishment of a new national Traveller and Roma consultative forum to be held annually. The first forum is scheduled for 9 October next. The Department is finalising details for the event in close consultation and agreement with national Traveller and Roma organisations.

In the context of funding for Traveller and Roma initiatives, the Government is strongly committed to achieving the goals outlined in the NTRIS II strategy, and funding is provided for the effective implementation of NTRIS II actions. Since 2021, there has been an annual increase in Exchequer funding allocated for Traveller and Roma organisations and initiatives, from €4.925 million in 2021 to €6.132 million in 2024.

In 2025, there was a 6% year-on-year increase in funding provided to Traveller and Roma organisations. In all, €7.84 million has been provided from Exchequer funding and the Dormant Accounts Fund to support a range of initiatives across the various thematic headings of NTRIS II.

I reiterate the Department's commitment to the vision set out in NTRIS II to a society where Travellers enjoy full equality, inclusion and recognition of their distinct identities. We, along with the other Departments and agencies, have much more to do. We do not underestimate the scale of the work required, but we are clear in our purpose and committed to working in partnership with all stakeholders to bring about lasting, positive change.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to meet today and engage with it on the implementation of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II and the associated action plan.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Ms Baxter for her contribution and opening statement. I now invite members to ask questions and contribute in any way they wish. The clock will say seven minutes and we will stick to that as best we can. I call on Deputy Ellis.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank Ms Baxter for that. I am glad there is progress being made, from what I can see. I suppose there are huge challenges with the attitudes and we have to address the inequalities that face the communities, whether Roma or Traveller.

On the two-year action plan and the strategy going to 2028, Ms Baxter said the Department has done an assessment there and has looked recently at how that is progressing. Will she give some insight into how that is progressing?

I do not know whether the Department deals with a lot of the inconsistencies in local authorities. There are a lot of inconsistencies across local authorities in how they deal with Travellers and Roma families, especially when it comes to housing. I wanted to raise that. There are also issues - it is not necessary for Ms Baxter to respond to this - with early learning and childcare and the meals and stuff that are provided to families, particularly in DEIS areas where meals are laid on for some. Some of them go to school and they do not even have a meal. Maybe Ms Baxter could give us an insight into that.

There are 17 family link workers supporting parents. Are some of them designated for Roma and some of them for Travellers? Ms Baxter mentioned that two workers engage specifically with Roma families.

Traveller Pride Week is huge and the funding that comes from the Department is massive and badly needed. On the heritage issue, the highlighting of Traveller heritage is very important. I always remember that on Dunsink Lane there used be the old-style caravans and we used to see pictures of people fixing or even making utensils, etc. It is important to get that out there and highlight it.

The employment issue is obviously a major challenge. We do not have many, if any, Roma and Traveller employed in the local authorities. There is an initiative the Department is working on to get people to look towards getting jobs in the Civil Service or elsewhere. Maybe Ms Baxter could outline some of that as well.

Ms Carol Baxter: I thank Deputy Ellis. We recognise that there are complex issues needing to be addressed. We believe that NTRIS II offers a good structure because it is a whole-of-government structure and it enables issues to be raised within it. We have referenced the steering committee. Traveller and Roma organisations are involved in that and that provides an opportunity to raise the issues of concern as well as report on progress.

It is an interesting structure. While we are the co-ordinators, each agency is responsible for its own actions. I cannot comment on local authorities-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I know.

Ms Carol Baxter: -----but what I will say is that Traveller and Roma organisations' representatives repeatedly raise issues, particularly in relation to housing. They bring those issues to the attention of the relevant housing officials.

In terms of the Equal Start programme, which is under our own Department's auspices, one of the objectives is that ultimately there would be a level of participation of Traveller children

in early learning and care that would reach the national average. That has been one of the reasons for the Equal Start programme. As the Deputy will be aware, Traveller and Roma children are a specific target group for Equal Start and the whole purpose is to provide additional supports to early learning and care providers so that they can engage more Traveller children and, indeed, Traveller families. We have recognised that Traveller families can be nervous about early learning and care. To that end, we have specific workers looking at the whole area of supporting Traveller families into early learning and care.

In terms of education, the link workers are Traveller focused because of the recognition that Traveller families can be nervous about engagement in the education sector. They themselves are typically Travellers and they can provide strong encouragement and support to Traveller families in terms of participation.

What the Deputy says about heritage is absolutely crucial. It is one of those areas where we as a Department are supporting a range of initiatives in co-operation. We referenced Traveller Pride Week and the work with the Heritage Council, but we are practically looking at a range of things, such as a commemorative postage stamp to commemorate Traveller ethnicity, recognising how important it is for a community to see themselves celebrated within Irish society.

Similarly, on employment, we have referenced the internship programme. We are very excited about that. There is quite strong interest from Traveller young people in going forward for those jobs. For the first time, there is the possibility of those interns being able to compete to be made permanent in the Civil Service. That is a great opportunity, but we are using a range of opportunities to support the work on employment, including the Department's funding of a special initiative for Travellers. This initiative is a long-standing programme of seven projects to support employment for Travellers and we are working to expand that to 14. Similarly, in terms of Tusla, which also is under the Department's auspices, it has a bursary to support Traveller young people in terms of careers in social care and social work. Four young people are being supported in that this year alone.

In terms of employment, an employment sub-group is led by the Department of Social Protection. They are the co-ordinators. There is a Traveller representative, Michael Power, who chairs thabt sucommittee. It is a whole-of-government response, with individual Departments responsible for individual actions, but where we feel we can add value we are both working as co-ordinators but also funding specific projects. Obviously, the crucial point is that it is a whole-of-government response.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I welcome our witnesses and thank them for the update. It was comprehensive and useful. I have a couple of comments and questions. I begin with the early learning and care and the Equal Start programme. I have certainly raised this issue here before. Do the witnesses have a view about on-site early years education versus integration? I have had experience with Traveller families in my own home county of Kilkenny, where there had been an on-site preschool, and it was subsequently demolished, and families moved out into other early learning settings. It is a question based on the point raised by Ms Baxter about nervousness and parents having a nervousness. The advantage as we saw it was that the families had a short distance to bring children to the setting while it was on site in a group housing scheme. Unfortunately, when it was demolished, the numbers fell away in terms of

participation. Is there a view within the Department about the settings for encouraging families to participate in early years education?

Ms Carol Baxter: I cannot say there is a view, and I will certainly bring that back to my colleagues, but it was more that there is a recognition that early learning and care is vital for all children. The approach in the Equal Start programme, which is obviously a large national programme, has been to ensure that Traveller children are supported to participate, but equally that providers respond appropriately. That has been the area of focus. One thing in a related area that we in our unit are working on is a cultural training standard. In the first instance this will be public service providers, but we hope to roll it out more broadly later. We will have a standard cultural awareness competency so that public servants engaging with Travellers and Roma engage with them in a culturally sensitive and appropriate way. We are in the first stages of developing that. The first documents have gone to the steering committee for its views and the intention is that it will be for discussion at the next steering committee. It is live at the moment. We have been working with the Traveller and Roma organisations and public service organisations. We think that is a good way to ensure service providers develop the competency and are equipped to engage appropriately with Travellers and Roma.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I agree wholeheartedly and have seen some of that working well on the ground in some early learning centres in my home town. Ms Baxter also addressed the issue of Traveller culture and identity. I welcome the work that has been done with the Heritage Council. In my previous role, I managed to put in funding for a Traveller inclusion and heritage officer within the council. The work being done there is exciting. We have asked the Heritage Council to present to us when that strategy is published. I must also acknowledge the passing of Tom McDonnell, who was one of the few remaining Traveller tinsmiths in the country. He passed away during the summer. I had the privilege of learning a bit from him during my time in office. He was a wonderful man passing on a fantastic and vital skill to young Travellers and to the wider community.

I really feel that celebration of Traveller heritage and Traveller culture given the music that Travellers have left to us, music that would not have survived. We were talking about the Fleadh Cheoil earlier. A lot of that music would not have survived were it not for members of the Travelling community. An awareness and understanding of Traveller heritage, culture and language is in itself a great leveller in the context of inclusion. I welcome that work is ongoing and it is an exciting prospect. I thank the witnesses for all of that.

I would be interested to hear more about the placement programme. It is a wonderful development, given the high levels of unemployment among the Travelling community. I would welcome such a project moving from a pilot into the mainstream. Is that the general idea of the approach the Government is taking?

Ms Carol Baxter: On the Traveller internship programme, applications are to be in by 26 September, so it is live at the moment. The idea is that over time it can expand, develop and get to sufficient critical mass that a range of Travellers can participate. A totla of 12 Departments are participating in this programme, which is great. Hopefully we will know shortly, but the initial indications are that there has been quite a level of interest which is great. We salute our colleagues in the Department of justice. They have worked assiduously on this in getting interest across a range of Departments. As the Senator said, heritage is really important. That is again an area where our Department feels we can support the work. There

has also been interesting work done within the universities in terms of Traveller history and putting the spotlight on developing a greater understanding of Traveller history. Again, that is an area we think is important.

I come to the whole area of cultural competency and the Equal Start programme. For instance, we plan to have diversity and equality experts specifically supporting the programme and supporting providers. We understand that contract has just been signed.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: That is most welcome. I have two final points. One is on the issue of housing. We had the Department of housing before us. I think it was at our last session before the recess. Looking at housing policy it is absolutely accepted that the needs of young Traveller families are changing. Many are opting to rent privately or find accommodation outside of group housing schemes. However, it is critically important that in developing group housing schemes, that awareness and support for Traveller heritage, particularly around horses, has to be supported. We can point to a number of good Traveller horse projects around the country and quite a lot of stop-start projects that did not get off the ground. Land unfortunately is becoming such a contentious issue in trying to find sites for Traveller men and boys to have access to a horse project. They really are proven to be effective means of intergenerational support. Outside of the animal husbandry issues it is more about the well-being of Travellers and Traveller mental health too. It is critically important that we continue to support projects where they are being proposed, not only from a financial perspective but also where sites can be identified and supported to be developed.

An Cathaoirleach: Thank you, Senator.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I apologise. There is one more point. It occurred to me that over the past number of weeks I have been involved in a project in Kilkenny. It is largely a biodiversity project about the ancient skill of scything. We have had some Traveller men and boys working on the project with us. It has been brilliant in terms of engagement. There might be an opportunity as we look towards the nature restoration plan and the management of invasive species to look at it from an employment perspective.

The young men we worked with over the last number of weeks had a fantastic few weeks and a lot of them expressed an interest in being involved in projects. If we are trying to divert young Traveller boys away from negative activities, we should examine this area and perhaps use the same interdepartmental approach. I propose it from a cultural perspective and in terms of the well-being of the men and boys we worked with. It was a really fantastic project.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator has made an excellent suggestion. I ask the officials to take note of it.

Ms Carol Baxter: It will certainly be interesting to get the information. We will take it back. As the Senator may be aware, the late Joe Horan, when he was the manager of South Dublin County Council, had a project in which Traveller men worked in the parks programme and that was very successful. The suggestion is a great idea and we can bring it back.

Obviously the Department of housing is very alert to the complexities of needs. To mention a related aspect, the caravan loan scheme has been fully allocated for 2025, reflecting again the need to support Traveller-specific accommodation choices.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I thank our guests. It is great that this fine strategy is in place and getting started. I will ask some questions and make some comments and I invite the witnesses to reply to each individually.

Ms Baxter said that 17 family link workers have been appointed, which is great. I ask her to tell us a little about the geographical spread and what precisely they will do. Will they focus on the Early Start programme? Will they work their way around? Will they be available in an holistic way to families? What is their angle in terms of the way they will work? When precisely will they start? Are the link workers in the field now? People will be very interested to learn about the scheme because it has great potential, please God.

Ms Carol Baxter: I ask my colleague, Ms McEvoy, to reply. We may have to get back to the Senator with additional information.

Ms Sinéad McEvoy: The link workers very much work with the parents of children. The scheme is very much about educating the parents and giving them the value of education.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Have the 17 link workers started? Are they well spread geographically?

Ms Sinéad McEvoy: We have 17 link workers because there are 17 Tusla areas. There is one link worker per Tusla area.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Ms McEvoy was saying they work with families.

Ms Sinéad McEvoy: They do work with the families, yes.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Will they work on everything in the family home? Let us say a family has a child in secondary education and a child in Early Start education, will the link workers try to get all of them motivated and going?

Ms Sinéad McEvoy: I think they have a broad remit but we would need to check that with our colleagues in early years who would have more detailed information on that.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Yes. It will be interesting to see how they go. I would appreciate it if the committee could be kept reasonably abreast of how the scheme is working.

An Cathaoirleach: I ask our guests to come back to us with that information and we can circulate it among members as it would be of interest.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Colleagues have touched on the next issue and obviously as the day goes on there can be an element of repetition. The whole idea of the work employment scheme is so exciting and important. One would not have to be a rocket scientist or a great sociologist to observe that among the greatest problems among the Traveller community is unemployment and the lack of positive ways to reach personal fulfilment in that sphere. The work employment scheme is great. Will it capture people who have varying levels of skill and maybe no experience of work? When I hear the words "Civil Service" I am inclined to think of jobs in education and administration. There is no reason a number of Travellers should not do that work. Of course they should and that is the ultimate aim. How widespread and catch-all will the employment effort be?

Mr. Conor McGinn: The posts available are at clerical officer and executive offer levels. The majority are at clerical officer level. I am not sure if the minimum requirement is the leaving certificate but we are not talking about graduate level, which makes the posts accessible for the majority.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That is brilliant, and why not? It should be the case. That is exciting. As has been said, it would be great if we were kept abreast of how that is going too.

Is there a strategy to capture the middle-aged man or woman who has not done anything but is in good enough physical shape? It could be work of a physical nature. Is there a strategy to ensure there is work to capture everyone?

Mr. Conor McGinn: The Traveller employment support scheme is relevant. There are seven locations around the country, such as Cork, Kerry and a few in Dublin, and they are available to work with people who are looking for jobs, whether they are young people or at any age. Equally, the placement programme does not discriminate on age grounds; it is available to all.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: So there will be a positive initiative there. I imagine that a number of Travellers could work as carers both within the Traveller community and elsewhere. There could be potential in that regard as there is a shortage of carers. All of the practising politicians in the room will say that the big problem is that one cannot get carers at the moment.

Mr. Conor McGinn: As Ms Baxter said, the initial work is with the Civil Service but then we need to push that out wider in other parts of the public service, such as in local authorities and whatever other services. We are also working with local enterprise offices to ensure they are available and accessible to the Traveller community as well with their business ideas, be it in relation to caring, for example, or other lines of work that are particularly relevant for the community.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Travellers have a trading tradition.

Mr. Conor McGinn: Absolutely, yes. That would be relevant.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: One can build on that. It is great that the initiative is broad and wide, and that it is happening at clerical officer level too. That is very encouraging. The people watching us talking here will be very heartened to hear that.

Travellers are on the consultative forums and NTRIS, which is important. I ask Ms Baxter to expand on that in terms of numbers and how NTRIS will work.

Ms Carol Baxter: The main Traveller organisations are represented on NTRIS. What we wanted to do was to try to have a very action-oriented committee, which includes Pavee Point, the Irish Traveller Movement and the National Traveller Women's Forum. All of the main representative organisations are on the steering committee and they are often on the subcommittees. The employment subcommittee is specifically chaired by a Traveller. The new forum is planned for 9 October. The intention is to bring a wide range of organisations and people together from across the country with the aim of striking a balance between a very action-oriented committee that moves things forward and having a broader forum which allows for consultation.

On the care issue, as I referenced Tusla provides bursaries for Travellers pursuing social care professions to be either social care workers or social workers. Four people are being funded this year and 21 people have been funded so far under that scheme.

Tusla sees that as a way of attracting Travellers into an area where there is crucial employment need. It is very interested in expanding that.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That is great news. That is excellent. I thank Ms Baxter for that and for the other information. I take her point that you need action rather than further talking shops. That point is well made. I have two quick little questions. The witnesses have said the Department does a biannual report. Would it not be better for that to be annual or even more often so that we, the taxpayers of Ireland, can see how this is working? I may have misunderstood.

Ms Carol Baxter: My colleague Ms McEvoy will come in. We get Departments to report to us biannually on progress on the actions but there is an annual report that is made public. The good thing is that it is all transparent. The minutes and everything are up on a website.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Every year, people, including this committee, will be able to see where it is going.

Ms Carol Baxter: My colleague will expand on that.

Ms Sinéad McEvoy: As Ms Baxter has said, all Departments and State agencies report in on a six-monthly basis. We discussed that at the steering committee. We just introduced the annual report with this new strategy. We will then have steering group meetings, different forums, research and information. We now have a designated webpage where all that-----

Senator Joe O'Reilly: There is an element in which it is pioneering. There is an element of breaking new ground.

Ms Sinéad McEvoy: Well, it is for this particular group.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: It is good. The last thing I will raise is something my colleague is very strong on and brings up all the time. I refer to the question of heritage. On the heritage strategy, am I correct that it was said there will be a heritage week or that there is a heritage event coming up soon? Senator Noonan is very strong on the heritage and speaks about it a lot. He has dealt with it well. There is an appetite for a celebration of that and getting the general public to respect and appreciate that heritage. The officials might expand a little on what the Department proposes in respect of heritage. Is it going to have a heritage week or a heritage event?

Ms Carol Baxter: It is a heritage strategy that is being led by the Heritage Council. The idea is that there will be a range of actions in it. It is well advanced and it is scheduled to be finalised by the end of the year.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: There will be nothing equivalent to Culture Night. I am thinking about a week dedicated to celebrating that heritage with a number of events or whatever.

Ms Carol Baxter: There is already a Traveller Pride Week but the heritage strategy may include a range of heritage-focused events. That strategy is in development at the moment, led

by the Heritage Council. We will certainly bring the Senator's idea of a specific week back to the council.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I am talking about something like the Culture Night concept. Something along those lines might be good. It is a very important element. I am a former teacher so I think education is central. However, the employment thing is huge. If this strategy achieved that and broke that glass ceiling, it would be extraordinary.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I thank the witnesses very much for joining us today. I welcome this second iteration of the national Traveller and Roma strategy. It is quite comprehensive. When we talk about these issues, it is always important to set out the context. We have to remind ourselves of how poorly the State has treated the Traveller community over decades and the State's consistent violation of the rights of Travellers. That is not just my opinion but the opinion of domestic and international human rights bodies over a period of time. To look at housing, in 2019, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights found that 24% of Travellers faced severe housing deprivation, a rate 30 times higher than that for the general population. When it comes to health, life expectancy is more than a decade shorter. Looking at the Roma population, 50% do not have access to healthcare and the community faces huge levels of social exclusion. There is a huge amount of work to do to catch up on those decades of underinvestment and lack of support from the State and to correct the State's poor track record in terms of the violation of the rights of Travellers on so many fronts.

As I said at the start, the strategy is quite comprehensive and is welcome. What concerns me most is implementation. Government Departments and the State generally have implementation deficit disorder on many fronts. There has been a failure to implement many of the great strategies that have been put together. I will tease through some of that and some of the barriers and how we could address some of those to ensure full implementation of the strategies. I will start with funding. Looking through the documents we have been given and the strategy, none of the actions seem to have been costed. There is no funding linked to each of the individual actions. Will the witnesses talk to us about the funding that has been provided by the Department for the different actions and pieces within the strategies?

Ms Carol Baxter: Each Department secures funding for the actions under its remit. They do this as part of the annual Estimates process. That changes every year. The funding I have mentioned is specifically for Traveller-focused units. It does not include, for example, the Equal Start funding or the Tusla funding. Each area secures its own funding.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Is there ring-fenced funding in each Department for implementation of the actions under the strategy? If we look to the Department of education or the Department of Health, would they have set funding secured under the budget to do the actions in the strategy?

Ms Carol Baxter: They will typically secure funding for the measures for which they are responsible. Particularly where it involves programmes, they will have a specified amount of money for those programmes. Particularly in the Department of education, but similarly in the Department of Health or the HSE, there will be specific funding allocated to particular initiatives every year. That is reported on as part of the annual expenditure processes.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Is there transparency and accountability by Department for the strategy? Is data available as to how much each Department is spending on the strategy?

Ms Carol Baxter: As part of their overall reporting on expenditure, they will indicate the expenditure incurred on Traveller and Roma projects. They typically also give us some data on expenditure. I will not say it is 100% as I cannot say that is absolutely the case but it is quite a lot. We will be putting that into the annual report.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Could the Department collate what it has and provide it to the committee so that we could have a look and see how much is being spent by Department?

An Cathaoirleach: That would be useful. From what I gather, it changes annually based on the programmes being proposed or developed. I could certainly see what Deputy Rice has requested being useful.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: My other concern relates to the dormant accounts funding, which has been mentioned. My understanding is that this varies by year and there may be an over-reliance on some of that funding for some of the programmes. Would that be correct?

Ms Carol Baxter: We have been working to secure mainstream funding in this area. Dormant accounts funding is brilliant but we see it as additionality. Our focus is on mainstream funding. The Deputy talked about implementation. From the very beginning, there has been a very strong focus on implementation.

In the action plan there are KPIs linked to every action in order that outcomes can be measured by the end of 2026 to see to what degree we have implemented what we set out to implement.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I accept that, but I have some experience of analysing equality strategies and the extent to which they are implemented by Government Departments. In some cases we see some of these strategies, not particularly this one but other I worked on, where some of the actions over a number of years were not implemented. My general point is that sometimes we are very good at producing glossy documents and good strategies but it is ensuring that there is a change on the ground that matters. The very poor statistics I set out at the start need to change and that is what is most important.

On the other barriers, how many staff in the Department are dedicated to working on the strategy on a full-time basis?

Ms Sinéad McEvoy: Within the Department there is myself – the unit is divided between Traveller and Roma human rights, along with LGBTI rights and the Magdalens. There is scope there. Working on Traveller and Roma human rights we have Mr. McGinn and Ms Balantine as APs as well as two AOs.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Is it Ms McEvoy's view that there is enough staff resourcing to do the work to oversee the strategy and the implementation of the strategy? Could the Department do with more staff to ensure there is implementation of the strategy?

Ms Sinéad McEvoy: You can always say the more resourcing, the more you will get done. Of course that is the way, but the strategy is very focused in terms of implementation. It is through two-year action plans where we are focused on actions that let us focus on work on those with other Departments and the Traveller and Roma organisations themselves. We have worked on ways to get around to making implementation stronger.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Picking up on that point on engaging with the organisations, my understanding is the Traveller forum meets once a year. It might be more effective if it met more often, maybe twice a year. It is important there is as much engagement as possible with the organisations in the community directly on the strategy and implementation of the strategy. Ensuring organisations have capacity to review the monitoring and implementation of the strategy is key and some kind of independent shadowing or shadow report could be useful. Organisations need resourcing and funding to be able to do that.

In relation to intersectionality and how this strategy speaks to the other strategies, particularly with regard to LGBT Travellers, the women and girls strategy or disabilities, how does it work at a departmental level in terms of ensuring there is that connection between the various strategies, that they do speak to each other and there is inclusion of those groups within the Traveller community? There is particular isolation among some of those groups within the community.

Ms Carol Baxter: We work across our teams to make sure that each of the strategies has an intersectional approach and that the approaches speak to each other. This afternoon we will meet the National Women's Council of Ireland and one of the issues is how the forthcoming national strategy for women and girls can integrate a strong focus on Traveller women. We are working across the teams internally in the Department. Each of the strategies has committed to an intersectional approach, which is very important. One of the issues in the annual report will be to what degree we have effectively brought forward that intersectionality. That will be very important.

To return to implementation, one of the key pieces that fed into the development of NTRIS II was that we got the Centre for Effective Services to do an evaluation of implementation of three of the previous equality strategies, those being NTRIS I, the National Strategy for Women and Girls and the Migrant Integration Strategy.It came forward with very good implementation recommendations and these informed our approach in terms of actions being strong and targeted KPIs using measurable data. The next National Strategy for Women and Girls has not yet been finalised and the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People is fresh off the press. We are at the beginning of the process and implementation in each case is one of the key things.

There are four dedicated officials on our Tusla team and other teams working on Traveller and Roma issues across Government Departments. The key aspect as we said is a whole-of-government approach because we recognise that structural issues require whole-of-government responses.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I echo the concerns of others about the attitudes and approach of local authorities. I welcome the cross-government approach of Departments, but at a local level I have concerns about how local authorities engage with the Traveller community, particularly in my own city of Cork. I spoke to a constituent recently, a Traveller woman with real housing need, who contacted the council on multiple occasions and did not even receive a response. This is a woman with real housing need. The council is refusing to respond to some queries it receives. There remain cultural issues within some of our local authorities and there is a lack of support being provided to some people with real needs. I thank our witnesses for all of their work on this issue and on other human rights issues.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Deputy. I share his concern. Some councils operate better than others, and often the interaction of the public representative is crucial in all these areas. I thank our witnesses for their attendance today. I share the excitement at some of the proposals of NTRIS II as well as the concerns Deputy Rice has alluded to in relation to the manner in which the State has treated the Travelling community over decades. Some of the proposals will go a long way towards repairing some of the damage done and moving forward in a cohesive and assertive manner. I would like to see our witnesses come back to us in a year's time to report on how NTRIS II is performing and give us as a committee an insight into the interactions they are having and successes, or lack thereof, depending on the interactions. That would be a good day's work. I thank the witnesses very much again for their contributions and the members for their interaction.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.48 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Thursday, 25 September 2025.