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, 27 Samhain 2025

Thursday, 27 November 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,	Eileen Flynn,
Tony McCormack,	Malcolm Noonan,
Séamus McGrath,	Joe O'Reilly.
Maurice Quinlivan.	

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

The joint committee met in private session at 12.36 p.m., suspended at 12.44 p.m. and resumed in public session at 12.50 p.m.

Traveller Heritage Strategy: Engagement with the Heritage Council

An Cathaoirleach: Apologies have been received from Deputy Connolly. The agenda for today's meeting is an engagement with the Heritage Council to discuss the Traveller heritage strategy. Our witnesses are Ms. Virginia Teehan, chief executive officer, Mr. Owen Patrick Ward, chairperson of the Heritage Council's national Traveller strategy working group and National University of Ireland Galway, NUIG, equality, diversity and inclusion, EDI, programme manager for race equality, Ms. Lisa Shortall, head of research, learning and cultural heritage, and Ms. Aalia Kamal, cultural and inclusive heritage officer. I invite Ms Teehan to make her opening statement.

Ms Virginia Teehan: I thank the Cathaoirleach and committee members for inviting us to attend. The Heritage Council recognises that there is an urgent need for a national strategy that protects, preserves and promotes Traveller cultural heritage. The Heritage Council strategic plan for the period 2023 to 2028 contains a commitment to developing and delivering a national Traveller heritage strategy supported by a work plan and resources to ensure that there is a strong network of strategic, sustainable and community-led support for Traveller cultural heritage. By means of that commitment, the Heritage Council acknowledged the profound inherent value of Traveller culture and heritage, the centrality of Travellers to Irish heritage and the important role of cultural heritage in tackling systemic racism, inequality and exclusion. The wider context for this working group is the well-documented need for further support for Traveller education, health, housing and employment. These are issues which, we appreciate, the committee is well aware of.

In December 2024, working in partnership with the Irish Traveller Movement, the Heritage Council convened a working group to: advise it on the development of a national Traveller heritage strategy and an implementation work plan; work with it on devising a programme of work that supports the delivery of the strategy; support it in engaging with Traveller groups, communities, organisations, and networks, local and national; and ensure that adequate monitoring and evaluation are built into the strategy, work plan and any resultant programmes in order to ensure progress against delivery is adequately assessed and reported. Membership of the working group was drawn from the national Traveller representative organisations, Traveller cultural organisations, Traveller youth bodies and other regional community organisations, groups and representatives. In total, there are 15 organisations represented on the working group, which is chaired by a member of the Traveller community. In that context, we are very pleased to have Owen Ward with us today.

The group's work is ongoing, and it is anticipated that the full strategy will be finalised within the next 12 months. Throughout this process, our focus is to ensure that we work in full accord with the Traveller community and that the development of the strategy is led by the insights, priorities and pace set by the Traveller community. The strategy will place Traveller engagement, consultation, collaboration and representation at the heart of its approach and plans. Within the Traveller community and the settled community and at State level, we want to ensure that our work: safeguards, preserves, celebrates, promotes and resources Traveller heritage while being conscious, sensitive and respectful of the diversity within this group;

develops pride, ownership and respect in Traveller identity, ethnicity and culture; provides a greater level of awareness of Traveller heritage, skills and customs; facilitates the transfer of Traveller skills, culture, heritage, knowledge and traditions from one generation to the next; protects and promotes the cultural rights of Travellers and supports equality, access, participation and enjoyment; and is culturally sensitive and trauma aware.

The work is in the context of the State' acknowledgement of Travellers as an ethnic minority in 2017 and the recently published National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028, as well as the relevant legal and international protections for the Traveller community. It is being done in the context of other relevant Heritage Council policies, such as our sustainability policy and our diversity, equity and inclusion policy. Our intention is to ensure that support for Traveller heritage is not siloed within this specific strategy but applies across all areas of Heritage Council work and broader State services. The Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018, currently on Committee Stage in Dáil Éireann, is an important backdrop to our work.

To inform the development of the national Traveller heritage strategy, the working group developed a national consultation programme with the Traveller community took place from August 2024 to April 2025. All consultation was co-facilitated by members of the Traveller community. The four national Traveller representative bodies, Pavee Point, the Irish Traveller Movement, the National Traveller Women's Forum and Mincéirs Whiden, were co-organisers of the events and participation was promoted through their networks

Before outlining the recommendations arising from the consultations to date, it is important to emphasise that these are initial outcomes. We are still working on this project. As the development of the Traveller heritage strategy continues over the coming months, these recommendations may evolve, deepen or be enhanced in response to ongoing engagement and as recommended by the working group chaired by Mr. Ward.

The following are the emerging recommendations. The first is a grant scheme for Traveller heritage. The Heritage Council's grant schemes are currently open to members of the Traveller community. My pack includes examples of grants recently awarded. A number of projects have been funded over the past three to four years and the numbers are increasing. However, in order to highlight the significance of Traveller heritage, we recommend the development of a dedicated grant scheme to support organisations, families and individuals in preserving, celebrating and sharing their heritage. This would provide practical support for community-led projects, traditional skills, arts, historical research and local Traveller initiatives. It is planned that grant funding will also support educational institutions, research activities and the management of archives as related to the protection, promotion and understanding of Traveller heritage

The second is that we propose to carry out a scoping study to examine how a national Traveller heritage institute or hub could be established. This study would explore potential models, governance, community involvement and the resources required. The aim is to create a central space - physical and virtual - that safeguards Traveller heritage, supports learning and provides a national point of access for the public.

The third is a Traveller heritage directory. We recommend creating a national Traveller heritage directory to map and highlight existing Traveller cultural heritage initiatives,

collections, skills, oral histories, creative practitioners and community groups. This would make Traveller heritage more visible, better connected and easier for communities, researchers and institutions to engage with.

The fourth is a Traveller representation scheme for museums and archives. We propose the establishment of a programme that supports museums, archives and cultural institutions to work directly with Traveller communities. This scheme would increase meaningful Traveller representation within these institutions, ensure that collections and exhibitions reflect Traveller history and culture accurately and promote long-term collaborative partnerships.

The fifth is Traveller language. The official recognition of the Traveller language by the Government represents an important and emerging priority for the working group and is fully supported by the Heritage Council. The Heritage Council welcomes this opportunity to underscore the cultural significance of the Traveller language and expresses its support for the work of others in advancing this matter. We recommend targeted actions to support, document and promote Cant-Gammon, recognising it as an integral element of Traveller identity and heritage. This may include research, community-led language projects, learning materials, recordings and public awareness initiatives.

The Traveller heritage strategy represents a significant national opportunity to ensure the meaningful integration of Traveller history and culture into teaching, learning and research activity. Its successful implementation would not only address long-standing gaps in support for Traveller cultural heritage, it would also strengthen inclusion, understanding and representation within Ireland's wider cultural and educational landscape.

The chair and the working group have consistently emphasised that the strategy can only achieve its potential if it is supported by ring-fenced and meaningful budgets within the Heritage Council. Without a dedicated and sustained financial commitment, there is a serious risk that progress will be fragmented, short-term or unable to respond effectively to identified Traveller community needs. Ensuring adequate resourcing is therefore regarded as essential to delivering the outcomes and priorities articulated by Traveller communities and to embedding the strategy as a cornerstone of national policy. The support of this committee in advocating for these resources would be welcomed.

In addition, the working group has repeatedly highlighted the importance of establishing a dedicated role within the Heritage Council focused specifically on driving the implementation of a Traveller heritage strategy. Such a role would provide continuity, leadership and accountability as the work progresses. The working group has strongly expressed the view that, wherever possible, this position should be filled by a member of the Traveller community, reflecting the principle that Traveller heritage must be supported and led by those best placed to speak from lived experience. The person in this role would play a key part in supporting training and capacity-building initiatives to enable members of the Traveller community to access Heritage Council supports and engage more fully in the State's cultural and heritage activities.

I note that the consultation also made a number of findings outside of the remit of the Heritage Council relating to areas such as accommodation, research, education, employment and the arts. In light of this, the Heritage Council plans to produce a publication based on the

findings of the consultations. This publication will, of course, be made available to this committee.

The Heritage Council acknowledges the profound inherent value of Traveller heritage and our responsibility to honour and respect that heritage. We continue to work with the Traveller community to deliver on our commitments as a State agency to support the State in protecting this unique resource. I thank the Cathaoirleach and committee members for their attention. My colleagues and I are happy to answer any queries and provide further information as required.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank the Heritage Council representatives for their contributions. The recommendation was for the development of a dedicated grant scheme to support organisations, families and individuals in preserving, celebrating and sharing. I am curious about a number of things. The strategy that has been drafted along with the work plan will be given to the working group in early 2026, or that is what is supposed to happen. At this point in the development of the Traveller heritage strategy, what does the Heritage Council estimate it will cost to implement the strategy? Does the survey include Travellers who are not specifically in Traveller accommodation or who have not taken up accommodation in council houses or otherwise? I am curious as to whether that is part of it.

I like the idea of a dedicated national museum. I know there would be different exhibits and so on. Is there a dedicated facility that would encompass all of the work that has been done on addressing the heritage situation of the Traveller people?

Ms Teehan said the group should be led by a member of the Traveller community. I agree. Things like that are frowned on if the person is not part of the Traveller community or somebody they can associate with.

There are many traditions and a lot of practice connected to horses in the Traveller community. Does that enter into the Heritage Council's thoughts when it comes to talking about all the different issues that come under the heritage strategy?

One thing I always remember is the storytelling. When I was growing up, we used to be up in Dunsink Lane, and we would sit around the tents, as it was at the time, and there would be stories to beat the band. Keeping them is very important. There were a lot of old sayings that I can remember, and they used a different language. Obviously, it was a mixture of language that they used, and we used to say "childer" or "You back an ass" - there were all of these crazy things. It is well worth preserving all of these. I hope this can be included in all we are doing here.

It is fantastic that we are trying to record all of this. There are so many other things regarding the way people are living in the Traveller community that have a huge bearing on their outlook and the way they handle things. Traveller families are very clannish in general. It is an issue where there are different families. They are very clannish, they stick together and they would be very specific to certain areas, certain sites and so on.

I do not know whether there is a way of breaking that down using the background knowledge we have about their heritage.

An Cathaoirleach: The witness may want to withhold the answer until Deputy Ellis returns after Questions on Policy and Legislation in the Dáil.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I will be back.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I welcome Ms Teehan and the team from the Heritage Council. From the perspective of this committee, over the past number of months we have dealt with a lot of significant challenging issues concerning the Traveller community. A lot of the challenges tie into a loss of Traveller identity and culture over many decades. It is wonderful to see the work the Heritage Council has been leading on this for many years. Given the rich contributions the Traveller community has made to Irish culture like music and crafts and to arts through the oral tradition as Deputy Ellis said, that points a way forward in addressing and being supportive of the Traveller community to celebrate their own stories. It is welcome to hear the outline of that strategy. As we have acknowledged here before, Ms Teehan and I met at the house of Tom McDonnell the great Traveller tinsmith during my tenure. He was a wonderful man, and it was wonderful to be allowed into his family home in Finglas to see first-hand his great skill. This is part and parcel of the strategy the Heritage Council leads on.

I have a number of questions. From the perspective of the committee's recommendations the key ask of a ringfenced and meaningful budget to support this strategy is vital. This committee needs to advocate for that and for a dedicated role within the Heritage Council to support that from the Traveller Community. They are basic asks to try to ensure this strategy is successful.

My first question relates to archive material and its collation from around the country. Will Ms Teehan give an example of some of the opportunities there to hold this material in a central repository for Traveller families to access themselves, but also for Traveller families to hand up and pass on archive material that is important to them? How can that be digitised, archived and presented to the public?

Ms Virginia Teehan: I thank the Senator for the kind words. I preface my response by saying that Tom McDonnell's daughters were at the National Heritage Awards in October. They won an award for a project they are doing in Finglas.

Senator Noonan took the Chair.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): That is fantastic.

Ms Virginia Teehan: They were reminiscing on the Senator's visit. I come back to his question. I again preface my remarks by saying that our work is ongoing. It is not complete. The recommendations are a signpost of what we will see in the final report. I defer to the chairperson and members of the working group drawn from 15 Traveller organisations. They will finalise the recommendations and agree the final report. I am signposting the direction of travel. Archives, the oral traditions and the world of Traveller life are central to all of this. One example I provide that is useful for the Travelling community is a programme we run in collaboration with the National Museum of Ireland called the iCan project where locally based communities are supported through the heritage officer network and their own community groups to collect and record oral histories. They are then supported to publish them in an online repository through particular professional guidelines to ensure the material is collected in a correct way and preserved in perpetuity.

The key approach to this is that it is citizen and community led. In particular, our work with the Traveller community must respect the priorities and pace with which the Traveller

community wishes to develop this programme. We are respectful of the fact that this is their heritage and their story, and they must define their language and the way in which that story is collected and collated. We have already funded a number of standalone projects. In particular there is the Cork Traveller Women's Network. It has collected oral histories, which it has presented in various exhibitions in the Cork Public Museum. We have already funded them through our grant scheme. There are already practices in existence among various Traveller community groups around the country, but this could be fragmented if it is not brought together into one national repository, whatever that may look like. That is something I anticipate this strategy may develop. I defer to the chairperson of the subcommittee, Mr. Ward, who may like to add to that if there is time.

Mr. Owen Patrick Ward: It is very important. In the community there is a lot of good practice at the moment, particularly with Traveller organisations. I acknowledge the huge amount of work they are doing. They are at the forefront of helping to protect and preserve this. Their voice is central. Another example is the Galway Traveller Movement, which does a lot of great work. It is doing a mapping project of various campsites around Galway city and county at the moment. The plan is to digitalise that and make it accessible to the public, including the community. A key element of digitalising that and the accessibility of it is that it is Traveller led, and the Traveller voice is central to it. That is very important. What came through in the working group is that there are various archives across community groups and public institutions, even in higher education, to look at how we can ensure that the Traveller content there is promoted and made accessible to the Traveller community and the public, and how we can learn from each other and link that to education, research and so on.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): Is it through library services at local level that it could be made publicly available?

Mr. Owen Patrick Ward: I go back to the online repository. We are having the discussion, again with the caveat that this has to all be agreed, that it would all be accessible, and we would see the libraries helping to embed it in local communities. They could play a role there.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): Fantastic. My second question is on music collections. I recently had a meeting with the Irish Traditional Music Archive. It is looking at moving collections county by county because there is such a huge volume of music content out there. Is that something this strategy could tie into in terms of identifying music that originated from the Traveller community around the country, perhaps looking at some sort of collaboration with the ITMA?

Ms Virginia Teehan: I certainly see that the broad recommendations from the consultations are looking at the work of institutions such as the Irish Traditional Music Archive, and as Mr. Ward has said, the universities also do work in this area, especially in Galway and Cork where there are strong schools of music. It would be good to encourage those institutions and enable them through some funding stream or a partnership to focus on ensuring that those musical legacies are not lost. I know that within the holdings in the Irish Traditional Music Archive are collections and recordings of Traveller music practice.

Some of them are the only recordings.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): Absolutely. Deputy Ellis is back. I have a final question on this round, if it is okay, and I will let Deputy McCormack in.

That is okay. With regard to a central repository, I know there is a scoping exercise to be done but how or where would Ms Teehan propose that an institute would be located, and has that been discussed yet?

Ms Virginia Teehan: I will defer, in a minute, to Mr. Ward as well because he chairs the committee and would be more up to date on the discussions taking place. This is a very big ambition and it should be a big ambition.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): It should be a big ambition, yes.

Ms Virginia Teehan: I am not trying to dodge the question but I think it needs a detailed, well-resourced piece of work because it needs to be done properly. It needs to be done once and it needs to be done properly. It has been discussed on and off for a long time around the Traveller community.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): Absolutely, yes.

Ms Virginia Teehan: It needs to be done in an ambitious way but it needs to be led by the community voices themselves. Of course there will be practical considerations that come into play, and I mention those around structures and governance, but that is simply the architecture around the heartbeat of what should be led by the Traveller community itself. More work is needed to do that piece. I am not trying to dodge the question but I am being truthful. I would like Mr. Ward to comment as well.

Mr. Owen Patrick Ward: Within the working group on truth consultation, the importance of having our own Traveller museum or institute really came to the fore. We believe that is the heart and centre of what needs to happen to ensure it is the anchor within the Republic of Ireland for Traveller heritage. We want that and we feel we deserve it. It is over time. We have been waiting a long time for it. Traveller activists and organisations have been calling for this since the 1970s. The time has arrived.

Going back to discussions around a location and how we have not arrived at that yet, we had a very multifaceted consultation in regional areas - Connacht, Munster, so on and so forth. A very strong team came through and we all share that but no location came up.

(Interruptions)

Mr. Owen Patrick Ward: What did come to the fore were discussions about what it could look like. It would be either a museum or a centre but the education and heritage is really important for us. What we did agree is that a scoping study needs to be done to pull that out further. In fairness to the working group, it includes representation from right across Ireland. It will be interesting to see how that progresses but we are up for the task.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): Great. That is fantastic, and it is something this committee would lend its support to as well. If it is okay, we might revert to responses to Deputy Ellis's questions.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The witnesses might be repeating some of the things but please do because I missed them.

Ms Virginia Teehan: To summarise so that I have it right, the Deputy asked me about the budget and the overall costs around the consultation, and whether it included Travellers in housing, and the scope and depth of the consultation.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Yes.

Ms Virginia Teehan: He then asked me about what the institute would like and then also a question about the consideration for Traveller traditions and practices, for example, the relationship with horses and practices around that. I will answer some and then defer to Mr. Ward for some of the more detailed pieces.

On the budget, as I was saying, this work is not complete. It is in progress. We have a great subcommittee chaired by Mr. Ward and the 15 Traveller community groups. We have, as yet, not defined what the budget would be. If the Deputy asked me, I could give him a rough outline of what it would cost to employee a Traveller heritage officer within the Heritage Council, and an outline of a reasonable grant scheme that could be scaled up over a period of years. However, the big and ambitious piece - we were just mentioning it when Deputy Ellis came back into the room - is to do an important piece of work establishing what a Traveller institute, hub or museum, the central point, would look like, the practical considerations around it but also what it would do and deliver on. It is badly needed. It has been needed for many decades and we just want to do one piece of good work and deliver that.

I am afraid I do not have a clear answer for the Deputy in figures. We can and would be happy to come back to this committee within the next nine months, or we can communicate with the Chair when we have a final report prepared. We will have more accurate information for members of the committee because I do not want to give them inaccurate figures.

We will come back to the consultation. Regarding the institute, as mentioned, this institute is a request and a clear need that the State should provide to ensure there is a central point that not only captures the practices, traditions and important legacy of the Traveller community in Ireland but also the identity, ethnicities and all the expressions, be they in language, living practices, lifestyles, nomadic lifestyles or whatever. We need to scope that out. That is a piece of work we need to do and it will, I am sure, be part of the recommendations emerging from the committee.

I know the consultation process has been very broad and regionally based. I know that from other work we do through our grant schemes. I refer to Traveller lifestyles such as, but not only, their engagement and practice with horses and the particular sites around the country, not only Dunsink. There is a great group in Cork that comes back to us every year with grant applications. It is really good and gets through the processes. It also records its sites in Togher and has exhibitions in the Cork Public Museum. They are encapsulated in the work that is being done.

To come back to the detail of the consultation, I will defer to Mr. Ward. The Deputy's question, as far as I understand, was whether the consultation included members of the community who are living in Traveller housing now.

Deputy George Lawlor resumed the Chair.

Mr. Owen Patrick Ward: When the working group and I were designing the consultation process itself, intersectionality was at the core of that, and also the diverse range of living

circumstances that exist within the Traveller community. We know some live on the side of the road and some live in halting sites, council estates or their own privately owned properties. We looked at the diversity of that. That was taken on board as well. Embedding that into design, the participants who attended the consultation would have represented those kinds of diverse living circumstances. I am confident we were able to capture that in the consultation process itself.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: In regard to that, my fear for a while has been that the vast majority of young Travellers are moving out of sites. That has been an ongoing trend which has broken up the communities a lot. It has been quite worrying to see it. We are obviously not building enough accommodation, or catering for people in those areas. It is having a knock-on effect in regard to the Traveller community, its heritage and language. All these things are being affected by losing their young people, etc. I do not know whether a recommendation can be made on this or if the witnesses can address that but it is a serious concern.

Ms Virginia Teehan: I thank the Deputy. Yes, we can take that on board and include it.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I will be really quick. I thank the witnesses for coming in today. I am sorry I was late in. I did not get the full opening statement.

As was said by my colleague Senator Noonan, a project like this is absolutely fantastic. It is part of our history. Traveller heritage needs to be recorded and needs to be put in a safe place so that it is there for future years. We need to support this to make sure the Heritage Council gets the funding required. We need to push this further up the line.

I am delighted that the council has been in contact with 15 different Traveller groups as part of the consultation process and is working on this because, without consultation, it will not get to where it needs to go to get the proper information. Apart from complimenting the work that the council is doing, my only ask is that it employs, trains and educates as many Traveller people as it can along the way to give them a livelihood out of what the council is doing.

Ms Virginia Teehan: I agree with the Deputy. The working group is focusing on ensuring that whatever we put in place is sustainable and of significant size and scale, but, as I mentioned in my statement, we would like to see a Traveller heritage officer from the community in our organisation. Since I took over my role in the Heritage Council six years ago, we have expanded our staff significantly. The knock-on effect that has had across the growing heritage sector is huge. If we could get one or two people employed in bodies like the Heritage Council, I would see this mirrored in the Traveller community. I know there is someone working in the National Museum, Oein DeBharduin, and people working in other organisations, such as the Irish Traditional Music Archive. They will serve as exemplars and support Travellers to feel that they are engaged, respected and that their contributions are valued. For those already working in those organisations, it will facilitate a sense of inclusion and highlight that there is an increasing openness for diversity among the workforce. The sort of work we do and the way we do it should shift and flex in reaction to new and different circumstances. We need to do that. I defer to Mr. Ward because he is working in education and has very important insights on this too.

Mr. Owen Patrick Ward: It is very important that the role is established within the Heritage Council. That would be central to the success of the strategy. We have also discussed other training and employment opportunities that could stem from this for the Traveller community.

There is a lot of potential there. Going back to the issue of resources, it is something that needs to be considered.

There are examples out there of Travellers being employed and leading projects. For example, there is Oein DeBharduin and the important work he is doing. Across the different regions, there are loads of opportunities to create and to collaborate not just with the heritage sector but also the educational sector to come together with the Traveller community to work on developing training courses and to look at how we can create employment opportunities. Traveller organisations should be a key part of that partnership, and they are very interested in it.

An Cathaoirleach: We had Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in Wexford this year. I was the head of PR for last year's thankfully hugely successful fleadh. In the first year of the fleadh in Wexford, its title was "A Fleadh for All". We were determined that the Traveller community would play a key role in the fleadh. We worked with a lady in Wexford Local Development, Enid Woolmington, who was a key worker with Travellers at that time. I spoke to some of the people involved in Comhaltas and fleadhanna. They told me that many of the traditional Irish songs come from the Traveller community. We decided to work with a group of young Traveller girls in Clonroche, County Wexford. We brought them together to be part of the fleadh and bring some of the Traveller songs to the event.

Has the Heritage Council ever thought about working with Comhaltas from a heritage point of view? We have spoken about the language and storytelling, but the songs are also a key component and a key part of the heritage. I would mention the great Pecker Dunne and his son Stephen, and the Furey Brothers of course. Pecker lived in my own town, Wexford, for quite a while and wrote a number of songs. He is buried in Killimer, County Clare. His son, Stephen, still lives in Wexford.

Given the intrinsic link between traditional Irish songs and the Traveller community, is a collaboration like that something the Heritage Council would consider in terms of an ongoing heritage project as part of Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann? The fleadh tends to stay in a place for two years at a time. It is Belfast next year and was in Wexford last year. It has been in Ennis, Cavan and all over the place. It is hugely successful.

From the point of view of interacting with the Traveller community and giving it a voice within a festival that is world renowned, it would be very beneficial to everyone involved.

Ms Virginia Teehan: I am not aware that we have had a specific engagement with Comhaltas. However, looking at the way the strategy is being shaped in preparing for this meeting, I anticipate that it will be recommended that this initiative engages with bodies like Comhaltas to provide supports that will highlight the role of Travellers in our musical heritage. I would also see us engaging with other organisation such as the crafts council. Senator Noonan mentioned the key role of Travellers in developing particular skills in tinsmithing, ironsmithing and other areas that are being lost. It is a concern. Equally, the different variations of the Traveller language need to be analysed and preserved. I could see the third level institutions, Údarás na Gaeltachta, or some of the bodies concerned with the deep protection of the Irish language and understanding the different dialects, playing a role in the development of the technical piece around the evolution of the spoken language of Ireland and where Cant and Gammon fit into that. I could see recommendations emerging in all these and other areas.

There was an excellent exhibition from young Traveller women around the practice of braiding hair in the National Museum. Mr. Ward may remember that. The ways in which people dress in contemporary society and historically is another area. There are so many features of the world of the Traveller community in song, poetry, language and dress. It is a whole lived life that needs to be identified and protected. I must be honest; we cannot do everything at once. This will have to be incremental and needs to be framed as something achievable.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: This has been fantastic. The work done to date is so inspiring. There is a fantastic opportunity here, but it goes back to the point made at the start that this has to be resourced. It is really important and a huge part of it.

My question is a larger heritage question. The role of the Heritage Council has changed dramatically since its inception by Michael D. Higgins way back in 1995. I know there is an aspiration or an objective in the programme for Government for a review of the Heritage Act. That is really important. Does Ms Teehan see an opportunity for that review to incorporate these aspirations from a strategy like this and not just give effect to it but actually see it adequately resourced by either a new piece of legislation or that broadening definition of heritage?

Ms Virginia Teehan: I thank the Senator. Yes. Thankfully, the programme for Government has shone a light on the need to review the Heritage Act. One of the key points that has emerged is that the definition of heritage has changed significantly since 1995. Great work was done by previous members of the Heritage Council and the previous CEO in protecting heritage. However, our understanding of heritage now is much broader than simply built, natural and cultural.

There is the whole area of intangible cultural heritage, which really embraces what we are discussing here today. That deals with the features of life in Ireland and indeed, life in general, as to how it is lived. It is about records and capturing how previous generations engaged with our world and in our society. That sounds a bit wishy-washy but this is what we are discussing today. Looking specifically at the world of the Traveller community is a great example of how a revised definition of what heritage means would become part of a statutory understanding of protecting heritage because it would be embraced in that.

We would like to see a strengthened role for the Heritage Council in engaging with research and evaluation. For example, there is our own work in supporting the establishment of an institution which showcases and protects the world of Traveller life and heritage in whatever it reflects. There should be some evaluation as to how that is performing and being resourced, along its continuing health. We can invest money and there is great enthusiasm around establishing initiatives but their long-term sustainability can sometimes be troubled. In the future, we would like to see a Heritage Council that ensures these types of initiatives continue in perpetuity. Giving the Heritage Council a role in supporting that might be a wise step forward.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I thank Ms Teehan. I have one more quick question. It crosses into themes and subjects we have discussed here and Deputy Ellis mentioned it as well. It is about Traveller visibility, certainly in terms of employment where many young Travellers are opting to remain hidden and hide their identity. Where does Ms Teehan see a strategy like this as having a role in trying to foster and imbue a sense of Traveller pride, particularly in young

Travellers who find themselves at a cross-roads in life and have to hide their identity when going for jobs?

I see an opportunity for a strategy like this to help pass on traditions from the older generation to younger Travellers in terms of language, music and the oral tradition. Is there an opportunity from this strategy to help do that? I know it is a very broad, sweeping question but it is an important one.

Ms Virginia Teehan: At a minimum, it would hopefully endorse that sense of pride in identity. The work that was done in acknowledging Traveller ethnicity is a really important, initial step. This could help to ensure the values and philosophy underpinning that legislation are actually seen in practice. The culture and tradition from which the young Traveller community emerge should be understood to be part of the many layered traditions of the history of Irish society. The Traveller community could stand proud within all the expressions of that.

There are so many different expressions of Irishness. It is not one identity. It is many identities. An endorsement not only by ourselves, as the State agency with the responsibility for heritage, but the attention of this committee and other work that is happening are important steps in confirming to members of the community that there is a respect for their world. The deeper work is required in ensuring that all the practices and traditions are acknowledged as being as important as any of the major exhibits across the road in either the National Museum or the National Library. Mr. Ward may wish to contribute to that.

Mr. Owen Patrick Ward: On hiding one's identity, particularly in employment, I am a senior manager in the University of Galway and I am a proud, Irish Traveller man. I never had to hide my identity. What is very important is to build your confidence to ensure you do not have to hide your identity is the environment you are in. For one to feel they belong, one has to feel there is a step before that, which is acceptance. It is acceptance of difference and acceptance of your ethnicity and identity. You have to see it and you have to feel it. That goes back to the environment you are working in.

For me, that would be a key part of that. How you know you are in such an environment is through the policies but also the promotion of Traveller history and culture. It is not just about having one event a year but also to be able to see there is teaching and learning. It is about seeing other fellow Travellers either working or being successful and progressing through as well. That is very important.

Going back to hiding your identity, it does happen. People are hiding their identity and the reason they do that is because there is an issue there and they do not feel they belong. It goes back to acceptance. Without acceptance, you can not feel that you belong.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: In the first instance, I apologise. I had three committees at the one time today; housing, public accounts and this committee. Apologies for missing the discussion and I thank the witnesses for the work they are doing.

I caught the tail end of what Senator Noonan said about identity and the issue of Travellers hiding their identity, which seems a very significant issue. Is that something Ms Teehan would say is on the increase or on the decrease in terms of a trend? I am always interested in trying to see a trend. Are we improving or disimproving in where we stand as a nation in this respect?

Ms Virginia Teehan: I will refer that to Mr. Ward because this is not something we have tracked in our work in any meaningful way.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Is there even anecdotal evidence of a trend?

Ms Virginia Teehan: It would be anecdotal.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: What is their sense of it? The witnesses are working in this area and I would like to get a sense of it.

Mr. Owen Patrick Ward: I will speak very broadly on this. The committee would have a good understanding of the issues affecting the Traveller community in Ireland. There are Travellers in employment and education who are hiding their identity. They choose not to disclose it. There are pros and cons to that. They do not have to if they do not want to. Others do it because of repercussions, particularly in employment. If you are a student, there could be repercussions with other students in the student body.

Going back to the roles of the institutions and the roles of where these people are at, there is a responsibility there. I cannot give a definite answer on whether it is increasing or decreasing.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I know. I just want to get a sense of it. It is obviously rooted in prejudice, stereotyping and so on and the fear that if their true identity is made clear, it will impact on them in a negative way. That is the underlying reason for it. It is particularly for those who are trying to progress in life and in terms of employment, education and so on. They feel there is that identity issue which will drag them back.

That is very sad. There are so many reasons why-----

Mr. Owen Patrick Ward: That is where this Traveller heritage strategy can help. I go back to my previous comment. If there is an environment in which Traveller heritage and identity are actively promoted, celebrated and embedded in a positive way, that will go a long way to helping. If students in a classroom or lecture hall or people in employment settings or wherever see that their culture is being represented in a good way, it goes a long way to breaking that down, not just for the Traveller person but also for the community at large as well.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Absolutely. That is if it is represented in a positive way. Unfortunately, their general experience is very often the opposite.

I apologise again that I only arrived for the end of proceedings. The witnesses are looking for support and assistance in terms of the heritage strategy. That strategy is critically important because there is a deep and rich heritage there. We can pick up the discussion in that regard another time. I will look at the transcript of the debate to see what I missed. I thank the witnesses for their work.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank everyone for attending. We certainly gleaned some valuable information that we, as a committee, look forward to using. Obviously, if our assistance is required to support the witnesses' work in any way, it is there. In the meantime, we will collaborate proactively and positively to ensure we can assist in enhancing their work in any way.

Ms Virginia Teehan: I thank the Chair and the members of the committee. We really appreciate the committee's interest in our work. We work in Kilkenny sometimes, so we are a little bit of an outlier.

An Cathaoirleach: As a Wexford man I can say that those in Kilkenny have always been seen as outliers. That goes back many centuries.

Ms Virginia Teehan: Many centuries. It is the year of the Normans next year.

An Cathaoirleach: Yes, indeed.

Ms Virginia Teehan: I hope we will come back to the committee when we have completed this work. I would like to publicly acknowledge Mr. Ward and the members of the subcommittee who give their time for free. They are doing very important work for us. I thank the Chair for this opportunity.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.52 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Thursday, 4 December 2025.