DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM SHAINCHEISTEANNA RÍTHÁBHACHTACHA A THÉANN I GCION AR AN LUCHT SIÚIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

Dé Céadaoin, 15 Aibreán 2026

Wednesday, 15 April 2026

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 6.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 6.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	**Seanadóirí / Senators**
John Connolly,	Eileen Flynn,
Dessie Ellis,	Malcolm Noonan.
Séamus McGrath,	
Maurice Quinlivan,	
Pádraig Rice.	

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

The joint committee met in private session.

Sitting suspended at 7.04 p.m. and resumed in public session at 7.05 p.m.

Traveller Accommodation: National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee

An Cathaoirleach: Apologies have been received from Deputy Barry Ward and Senator Maria Byrne. This meeting is to discuss the issue of Traveller accommodation with the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee and our witness is Mr. Niall Crowley, chair of the NTACC. You are very welcome, Mr. Crowley.

I ask anyone attending remotely to mute their microphones. As the witnesses are within the precincts of Leinster House, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentations they make to the committee. This means 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 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 that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or entity outside of the Houses or an official of the Houses either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I now invite Mr. Crowley to make his opening statement. We will then proceed with a question and answer session.

Mr. Niall Crowley: I thank the members of the joint committee for their interest in the work of the NTACC and the opportunity to be here to brief them on it. I am its chair but I am also its independent chair. That is an important detail to mention and, as independent chair of the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee, I am also independent chair of what is called the programme board.

The National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee was established under the Traveller Accommodation Act 1998, so it has been there a long time. It has an advisory role to advise the Minister on matters concerning Traveller accommodation, local-level participation of Travellers in relation to accommodation and the preparation, adequacy, implementation and co-ordination of Traveller accommodation programmes. As such, it is quite a big brief in relation to that accommodation field.

The programme board is also a relevant player. It was established in 2021 by the Minister of the time to oversee implementation of the recommendations of the Traveller accommodation expert review which reported in 2019. There is an overlapping membership between the two bodies, which is why I raise them both at this stage. Both bodies are multi-stakeholder. They have overlapping membership such as national Traveller organisations, the CCMA and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The Association of Irish Local Government, AILG, is on the NTACC only. They rely on consensus, which is important and can be a challenge but, currently at least, they do benefit from robust and positive engagement and collaboration across those different stakeholders.

I will address three strands of the work, namely, Traveller-specific accommodation, Traveller homelessness and the governance of Traveller accommodation. In terms of Traveller-specific accommodation, the NTACC has welcomed the positive level of spend that is now being achieved through the Traveller accommodation programmes but we remain concerned at the balance between refurbishment and new-build, Traveller-specific accommodation. Refurbishment is necessary and is hugely important in the context of poor living conditions, but the limited progress and level of expenditure on new builds remains a challenge.

Currently, the NTACC is particularly focused on the design of Traveller-specific accommodation and the imperative to update the national guidelines in this regard. Through the work of the programme board, a report on good practice in the development and design of Traveller-specific accommodation has been published by the Housing Agency and that is to inform new guidelines being developed by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. That is very timely and hugely important.

In our consideration of that report, the NTACC welcomed two particular strands: the significant focus on local engagement with Traveller families and Traveller organisations as central to coming up with solutions, in what should be a supportive national framework rather than a prescriptive guidance; and secondly, the clarity that cultural difference gives rise to specific needs. If there are specific needs, there is a need for cultural competence training to be provided for all actors in the process and for funding to be provided to address cultural difference, identified in the report as including engagement with outdoor spaces, horse ownership, nomadism, extended family and home-based economic activity.

Again, local engagement is very important in establishing how those to be accommodated in a particular area choose and seek to live out their Traveller identity. The NTACC has further noted a value in promoting and supporting positive interactions between Traveller and settled neighbours, and investing in that. Another strand of focus is the area of nomadism and the provision of transient sites. That has been identified as an important element in culturally appropriate provision, most specifically in the work of the programme board. Currently, we are seeking tenders for field work research on this topic through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, to take an island-wide perspective on that issue of nomadism and the provision of transient sites.

Finally, we have brought a specific equality and human rights perspective to bear in our concern to ensure the implementation of the public sector equality and human rights duty and compliance with the Equal Status Acts is evident in the design and implementation of Traveller accommodation programmes and on the agenda for local Traveller accommodation consultative committees. That is an important underpinning element in the work.

As regards the strand on Traveller homelessness, it is inevitably, sadly, a concern for the NTACC. The NTACC is represented on the national homeless advisory committee and through this has encouraged attention of the committee to the over-representation of Travellers in homelessness and the need for culturally appropriate responses to Traveller homelessness. On the NTACC, we have tried to track culturally appropriate responses as they are being developed and piloted in different areas. Recently, we have pointed to the potential of a Genio-funded project in Galway on peer-led responses to Traveller women and children at risk of homelessness. Quality data is crucial and the effective use of a Traveller or ethnic identifier is a challenge in tracking the situation of homelessness and the wider issue of accommodation for

Travellers. The programme board has set up a data subgroup to look at data collection in relation to Travellers and accommodation and is piloting training around the use of an ethnic or Traveller identifier by local authorities.

The final strand I raise is the area of governance in relation to Traveller accommodation. It is a particularly intense focus for the NTACC and the programme board at the moment. Governance at national and local levels is a focus for the board. We have commissioned papers from the Housing Agency on what a renewed local Traveller accommodation consultative committee would look like, with a capacity to contribute to local delivery of Traveller accommodation, and we have commissioned a further paper on options for the arrangements at national level that would serve to improve delivery of Traveller accommodation. This is an area where consensus still remains to be built on the programme board but there is, positively, a shared emphasis and the evolution of structures at local and national level must increase their influence, secure full participation and create links and connectedness for Traveller accommodation with wider interests and wider stakeholders.

Finally, in terms of governance, we on the NTACC have emphasised national to local links as an important element in the governance arrangements. To that end, we convened a very fruitful conference of the local Traveller accommodation consultative committees last year to present the work being done at national level and then, very importantly, to discuss the issues at local level, issues related to consultation and assessment of need, collaborative governance, culturally appropriate accommodation, roadblocks to implementing Traveller accommodation programmes, equality and human rights, and the caravan loan scheme. There is a very interesting and useful conference report that the Housing Agency prepared out of that event, which will serve - I hope, anyway - to set the agenda into the future for the NTACC and the programme board. I thank the committee for this opportunity.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Mr. Crowley. We will move to questions and answers.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Mr. Crowley mentioned in his opening statement that the NTACC remains concerned about the balance between refurbishment and new Traveller accommodation. What is the current ratio of new build to refurbishment and does he have an understanding of the number of new builds that need to be constructed to meet demand?

Mr. Niall Crowley: I do not have the data available. There is a meeting of the NTACC coming up and we are to get more up-to-date data but I do not have the data with me here. However, that is available through the Department.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Will Mr. Crowley explain to me what he is talking about when he refers to refurbishment. Is it houses or-----

Mr. Niall Crowley: Largely our focus is on Traveller-specific accommodation, so it is the refurbishment of group housing or of halting sites. It is what, in wider housing parlance, would be referred to in most cases as regeneration. One of the things that will be important is that it begins to be seen as regeneration of sites.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Just to get it right now, we are talking about not necessarily building new sites but refurbishing existing sites-----

Mr. Niall Crowley: Exactly.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Mr. Crowley is not talking about individual units; he is talking about sites.

Mr. Niall Crowley: Individual units on the site. It improves the living conditions for everybody on the site and therefore is very important.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: However, that is where there is group build,-----

Mr. Niall Crowley: It is already built.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: -----not necessarily caravans or trailers.

Mr. Niall Crowley: Yes. Well, it could be a halting site as well but it tends to be group housing.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Yes, but what would you be refurbishing on a halting site?

Mr. Niall Crowley: You would refurbish the ancillary facilities and maybe the bays. It tends to be group housing.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Do we have an idea of how many of those we have done?

Mr. Niall Crowley: No. The Department would have that data.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: We do not have an idea of what needs to be done or the demand. Mr. Crowley also mentioned the culture and lifestyle needs to be considered in the refurbishing and building of Traveller accommodation. What are the elements currently missing in the construction and refurbishment of Traveller accommodation that he thinks should be included in the design? What is missing?

Mr. Niall Crowley: The report that the programme board commissioned has been really helpful in that regard in pinning down some of the strands of Traveller culture and identity that relate to accommodation. The strands it identifies are the importance of extended family and living with them; the importance of the Traveller economy and Traveller economic activities tending to be home-based, the importance of nomadism and the importance of horse ownership within the Traveller community. There are a number of strands like that which need to be accommodated where Travellers are living out their identity on the basis of whichever of those strands they are involved in. What is interesting is that there is good practice in all of those areas. It is just there is not a uniform approach to responding to cultural difference.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Who is ultimately responsible then? Is it different local authorities?

Mr. Niall Crowley: Ultimately, it is the local authorities but it needs funding from the national level as well. I hope the new design guidelines will be a very important stimulus to a stronger focus on that.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Does Mr. Crowley have any sense of local authorities sending back money or not spending their money? What happens there, or would that not be his remit?

Mr. Niall Crowley: We do get reports on spend. That does not seem to be an issue now that there does seem to be a full spend. The issue is that the scale could usefully be increased and the balance in terms of new build.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: We had presentations a couple of months ago on the issue of spend on Traveller accommodation but it was not actually being spent on accommodation. It was being spent on ancillary stuff such as training for staff and for paying staff in councils. Do we have any idea what goes into building houses or building accommodation?

Mr. Niall Crowley: Yes. Figures are presented annually of the spend, and supporting Traveller accommodation does covers some ancillary activities, the refurbishment or regenerations and the new builds of Traveller-specific accommodation. It is the balance within that which has been raised at the NTACC as an issue.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Mr. Crowley mentioned the issue of homelessness as well. Homelessness within the Traveller community is high, as we were told at previous meetings. Does he believe there are specific further causes within the Traveller community that are not impacting the settled population in the same way?

Mr. Niall Crowley: We do not know enough about cultural difference and homelessness, whether there is a different experience of it and what is needed in terms of culturally appropriate responses. We have the beginnings of pilots and research on that. My guess is the experience is different with longer stays in accommodation and it being harder to find accommodation, without a doubt. The experience is different as regards some of the stigma associated with it. It is different because of the importance of the extended family. What we tend to see is more hidden homelessness in terms of overcrowding. In those areas, there are clear differences already. It is an area which we need to know more about and respond more effectively to.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I thank Mr. Crowley for his opening statement. I will focus a little on nomadism for a minute because it is an intrinsic part of Traveller culture. Yet, having been involved in the development of a couple of Traveller accommodation programmes through our local Traveller accommodation consultative committee, LTACC, it is incredibly difficult to get any objective there incorporated into a TAP to incorporate nomadism. I would anticipate that if it were working well, it should happen between Traveller accommodation programmes and between counties. I think it fundamental to the well-being of Travellers. That loss of their nomadic lifestyle has led to so many health and well-being issues since the 1960s. Does the NTACC have a view on how we might move towards a space, or even look at models that might work, where nomadic lifestyle could be incorporated and where transient sites could be incorporated in counties that would work and would be serviced and taken care of? Are there examples across the country where families who want to go on the road for the summer have an opportunity to do so?

Mr. Niall Crowley: The way the Senator put it is interesting in terms of the changing forms that nomadism is taking. In most instances, families tend not to be permanently nomadic. It tends to be for part of the year or for particular economic circumstances, or between England and Ireland. Nomadism, without a doubt, remains central to the culture. The equality reviews undertaken by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission of the provision of Traveller accommodation identify exactly what the Senator says, which is that there is no provision for nomadism really. It is dealt with in the Traveller accommodation programmes by saying there is no demand for transient sites. I do not think that is based on an accurate assessment of need. The work of the programme board will be hugely important in trying to develop a perspective on the provision of and the need for transient sites on an all-Ireland basis commissioned by the Department of housing jointly with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. We are very much

hopeful that there would be a programme board steering committee that would guide that research as well. Hopefully, that might begin to shift the thinking, the approach and the reluctance to move on it because it is clearly there and it is a problem.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: If that were the case, would a programme of work inform the county Traveller accommodation programmes and would LTACCs be on the same directive or actively encouraged to ensure they are implementing recommendations in that regard?

Mr. Niall Crowley: The journey from research to local implementation is always too long, from my perspective, but you would have to hope that this reopens the topic of Traveller nomadism, reopens guidance on the provision of transient sites and that it would lead to new action at local authority level and at regional level.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: On the issue of governance and the operation of the LTACCs themselves, does Mr. Crowley have a view on the reporting mechanisms, say, down into local community development committee, LCDC, structures at local authority level to plenary of council? How effective are those across the country? I am sure there are inconsistencies right across the country as to how the TAPs are developed more generally. Are they co-designed? Are they just cut and pasted? Does Mr. Crowley have a recommendation for better governance structures for the LTACCs in terms of their constitution, their make-up and the participation of Traveller representatives in general on local Traveller accommodation committees?

Mr. Niall Crowley: I think there is agreement that the LTACCs are hugely important in that if you want to follow that policy chain from national level to local level and secure implementation, you need local drivers, and the LTACC should be a key local driver. Equally, there is a concern - it came out in the expert review group and is a focus now for the programme board - that the LTACCs are very much a mixed experience. Some are deeply conflictual and conflicted, some - a small number maybe - are effective and others are struggling. That is why one of the first items on the governance agenda that we will look at as soon as we have the paper we have commissioned from the Housing Agency is the guidance on local Traveller accommodation consultative committees in order that we could seek to strengthen them. That will be hugely important. It might require legislation. We do not know yet what will be in the report, and it would be very important that there is good support for that. It is on the agenda but we do not have the answer yet.

Where we do have agreement, though, is that the LTACCs need to be more influential. They need to continue to be participative. They are participative but sometimes the culture within the LTACC does not lend itself to good participation and LTACCs have broken down as a result. They need to be connected, exactly as the Senator described. They tend to be quite isolated. They should be interacting with the strategic policy committee, SPC, for housing in local authorities, with the LCDC, as the Senator said, and with the corporate leadership within the local authority. That is a challenge, but those three elements are key and agreed.

What was interesting in the conference with the LTACCs was that the whole issue of meaningful engagement was a dominant theme. That can be seen in the report. It keeps coming up in terms of the desire for meaningful engagement on the design of sites, co-design and co-decision-making. We hope the new design guidelines might assist in that meaningful engagement in the mid-term review of the TAPs because there was quite a lot of concern, I

think, about the targets set in the TAP, which came out quite strongly at the conference. Meaningful engagement in homelessness structures was the other area.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: There is some good work done in our own community in Kilkenny with Workhouse Union, where they engaged in a participative process in the co-design of horse projects. The horse projects unfortunately never got off the ground, but the piece of work was really valuable and showed a model, if it were to have been realised, that would have been a fantastic project.

May I ask one more question?

An Cathaoirleach: Certainly.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: It is on the issue of design and co-design more generally. Does the NTACC team give consideration to innovative design of group housing schemes or of Traveller accommodation more generally? I know Mr. Crowley mentioned the issue of Traveller economic activity and the extended family, but I am talking about the physical design of buildings using innovative materials and good landscaping. Many of the group housing schemes across the country are often nature-poor. They do not give accommodation to Traveller culture in terms of horse projects, etc. Is there an opportunity there to give consideration to incorporating innovative design solutions around the cultural needs of Traveller families that could be developed as a pilot scheme?

Mr. Niall Crowley: The NTACC is limited in its space and resources. That is an issue and is one of the reasons why national governance is an issue. Certainly, it would be interested in innovative design. That was clear in its consideration of the research done on the design and development of Traveller sites, which drew from a lot of good-practice examples and could chart a new way forward. The way the NTACC was talking about it on all sides was that the design guidelines should and could be a game-changer. That is a quote from somebody at the meeting. This is hugely important to acknowledge, but it is also hugely important that we get it over the line and that they get implemented.

The Senator raises another thing in that there is a lot of good practice going on, but we are not learning from one another that this is the way forward and that it was done there so it can be done here. That sort of conversation does not happen.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: I have just one further quick question. Would it be okay to get a copy of the caravan loan scheme report from the conference report?

Mr. Niall Crowley: Yes. It is not a caravan loan scheme report; it is a report of the conference that the NTACC convened with the local Traveller accommodation consultative committees. It is an important strand to reflect our concern for national local dialogue.

One big theme in it is the caravan loan scheme. It is a big theme in the ongoing work of the NTACC. While we are far from consensus in this regard, there is consensus that it is a hugely important scheme and that elements of it are culturally appropriate. There is real concern with the scale and design of it, however. Where that goes, I cannot predict but it is very much on the agenda.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I thank Mr. Crowley for his statement and coming in today. I will start by taking us back a decade. In 2016, a headline in *The Irish Times* read, "State is violating Travellers' human rights". The article from Kitty Holland goes on to say:

> Travellers' human rights are being violated by the Irish Government's failure to provide enough accommodation and to maintain many sites at an acceptable standard, a European committee has found.
>
> In a landmark judgment published [that day], the European Committee of Social Rights – part of the Council of Europe – has found the Government is violating Travellers's [sic] rights under the European Social Charter.
>
> Does Mr. Crowley think the State is still violating Travellers' rights ten years on?

Mr. Niall Crowley: Traveller accommodation remains a huge equality and human rights issue. It is a human rights issue in terms of the lack of adequate provision. It is an equality issue in terms of the lack of appropriate provision. The answer is "Yes", and that is one of the reasons equality and human rights are an underpinning theme in the ongoing discussions in the NTACC.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: In the decade since the Council of Europe made that judgment, what has changed?

Mr. Niall Crowley: Not enough has changed, without a doubt. For historical things, the Deputy is asking someone with a bad memory. Not a lot has changed.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: The point I am getting to is that, even over the course of a decade, we are not seeing change.

Mr. Niall Crowley: Progress is-----

Deputy Pádraig Rice: It is often said-----

Mr. Niall Crowley: -----very slow.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: -----in these Houses that a house cannot be built overnight. We cannot even seem to solve these things over the course of decades, which is deeply concerning and alarming.

Looking at some of the statistics, I am concerned about what I am seeing. A total of 1,700 Traveller families, making up 6,840 individuals, are living in unsafe and inadequate conditions on unauthorised sites or sharing housing. Those are concerning figures. When it comes to the response to over 1,700 Traveller families living in unsafe conditions, the Traveller accommodation programme delivered just 96 new units nationally between 2019 and 2024. That is not even a drop in the ocean to respond to the need. I am concerned in that regard.

Some of the actions coming out of things like the Housing Commission and the programme board are not progressing at the scale we need. For example, the Traveller accommodation expert review group from 2019 recommended an independent authority to oversee Traveller accommodation delivery, but that still has not emerged. There are no annual supply targets or national strategy implementation. The 2024 Housing Commission report recommended a national Traveller accommodation authority. What is Mr. Crowley's view on that? Where is it

at? Why are we not seeing progress on these recommendations when the State is clearly in violation of people's rights?

Mr. Niall Crowley: The Deputy's last point raises the issue of governance. I will answer that first. The is no agreement on the programme board on the way forward in terms of national governance. That is why we have commissioned the paper from the Housing Agency to look at options and provide arguments for and against different options. I am hoping that will move us towards consensus as to what is needed to strengthen national governance. I have my own opinion but it is irrelevant as the independent chair. My role is to find a consensus to strengthen national governance.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: It is clear that local authorities have completely failed in their duties and responsibilities to provide accommodation at local level. This needs to be carried out by a national authority, as recommended by the Housing Commission and others. It would be good to see progress on that and move towards consensus and implementing some of these recommendations. We cannot just allow the situation where things are not changing decade after decade.

One of the issues flagged by one Traveller organisation was around the repeal of the criminal trespass legislation. Does Mr. Crowley have a view on that and whether it is required?

Mr. Niall Crowley: To clarify, am I answering as the independent chair of the National Traveller Accommodation Consultatory Committee rather than as an individual citizen?

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Yes.

Mr. Niall Crowley: The issue of governance is definitely a key priority. It will not be the only answer, but it is a key part of it without a doubt. It is definitely a priority on the programme board, but we have to find consensus across the different stakeholders. I hope the papers being produced by the Housing Agency will assist in that regard. It is about governance at both national and local levels. To some extent, local responsibility cannot be abandoned. That local drive and implementation is always going to be important.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: We lack the local drive piece.

Mr. Niall Crowley: That drive is needed. I am not arguing about that. That is why we are looking at governance.

With regard to the repeal of the trespass Act, the programme board, on foot of the expert review group report, has been looking at an eviction protocol to look at whether we can create the conditions to avoid the use of evictions in that way. An eviction protocol consists of dialogue with the families involved, a response to their needs and steps to ensure their safety. Those are probably the three key elements. That is not agreed yet, however.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: One of the recommendations in the programme board update to the Traveller accommodation expert review in 2025 was an in-depth, nationwide survey of the characteristics of the Traveller population, including locations and types of accommodation. It was to be commissioned. It was stated that this work was ongoing. Is there an update as to where that is at?

Mr. Niall Crowley: That is waiting for the work of the data subgroup, which is looking at how we gather data and what steps need to be improved in that regard. We will then have to gather the data and analyse them.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: It seems to me there is a failure by the State and particularly homeless services to gather or capture the data at the entry point.

Mr. Niall Crowley: There has been an improvement in that regard. In some instances, there is a Traveller identifier, while in others there is an ethnic identifier. The data subgroup has identified two challenges so far. One is the fear of identifying. People do not do it because they do not see a gain in it. The other challenge is that the way it is being administered does not help people to identify in that way. They are certainly two areas we are piloting. For example, the programme board is piloting a training initiative with one local authority as to how it administers the Traveller identifier and ways in which that could be improved. That will be interesting. We must collect data better and convince people that it is worth identifying. They are probably the two big barriers.

Deputy John Connolly: Do we quantify the preference of members of the Traveller community when they make an application for social housing, such as those who wish to live in Traveller-specific accommodation, group schemes or halting sites. Do we have that data?

Mr. Niall Crowley: There is data through the Traveller accommodation programmes and local authority data gathering. It informs the Traveller accommodation programmes. A concern emerged from equality reviews of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission about whether people were stating true preferences. When people need to solve immediate and difficult circumstances, they will go with the most likely solution rather than the solution they would prefer. That is certainly an issue. One of the issues that came up in the LTACC conference was around the assessment of need and capturing true preferences, as well as capturing projected need. That is also quite an important issue.

Deputy John Connolly: It is not collated nationally. It is just the local authority.

Mr. Niall Crowley: It is collated by the Department and we see data on an annual basis.

Deputy John Connolly: As a matter of interest, in terms of tradition, do we see that more members of the Traveller community are choosing not to select halting sites as a preferred means of accommodation?

Mr. Niall Crowley: There is a move towards group housing. That is probably the most identified, selected and preferred option in the context of Traveller specific accommodation. There probably is an increase in the number of Travellers selecting standard accommodation as well. They are two issues.

The other interesting bit is that in some areas, particularly urban areas where there is social housing development, group housing is being developed within that.

The interaction between Traveller and settled neighbours needs to be worked on as well so that it does not create ghettos within social housing. That is important, but when we look at the data, a concern is whether we are getting true preferences. A second issue is also interesting. Travellers are making genuine choices to move into standardised housing, but that does not

mean they do not want to be Travellers. Therefore, how do we support Traveller identity within what are essentially intercultural estates?

Deputy John Connolly: I noted the emphasis on design and that new guidelines on design are going to be published. Are the existing guidelines outdated or old?

Mr. Niall Crowley: They are hugely outdated.

Deputy John Connolly: What aspects of them are we seeking to improve? Are we looking towards getting the type of scheme that Mr. Crowley described, whereby if an estate is being developed, there would be a group scheme within that?

Mr. Niall Crowley: Some local authorities are moving in that direction. It is an interesting direction, and it certainly has been supported by Travellers in two of the schemes that I am aware of. The guidelines are important. One of their new developments is the idea of codesign and responding to local needs rather than prescribing at national level how something has to be built. That is important. There are different opportunities, needs and ways of living out Traveller identity at local level. The emphasis on local engagement struck the NTACC as the big new development in a way, one that could create more forms of innovation, as Senator Noonan said.

Deputy John Connolly: I want to go back to the point that Deputy Quinlan asked about. In terms of more expenditure on refurbishment at the moment rather than new developments or new builds, has the NTACC any examples of where local authorities have recently built new halting sites? I am not referring to ones that have been refurbished, but new ones.

Mr. Niall Crowley: There are very few examples. I think the data is there. I apologise that I do not have it to hand, but the rate of new builds is very slow.

Senator Eileen Flynn: Through the Chair, those new builds are actually done by other housing bodies, as far as I am aware.

Mr. Niall Crowley: Some are from approved housing bodies.

An Cathaoirleach: Will the Senator bring that up later?

Senator Eileen Flynn: I am just helping the discussion.

An Cathaoirleach: Yes.

Deputy John Connolly: So, there are very few. In terms of the ongoing refurbishment of the existing sites, would the NTACC be satisfied with the level of investment?

Mr. Niall Crowley: There is still a lot of refurbishment to be done, so it is a question of how quickly it can be done. In some areas, it is moving very slowly, and people are in very difficult living circumstances.

Deputy John Connolly: In terms of the changes in design, the new design guidelines are looking for increased outdoor spaces and the recognition of nomadism. Will we then be putting in fewer units when we refurbish them? There was one scheme in Galway where there might have been five bays before it was refurbished but four bays afterwards. Are we losing spaces with the new design models?

Mr. Niall Crowley: The new design guidelines have not hit in yet, so we are not.

Deputy John Connolly: Sorry. I should have said "with the refurbishments".

Mr. Niall Crowley: That can happen, but it is about creating proper living conditions for people. If they were not there in the first place, the site will hold fewer people, but they will be living in proper conditions. I do not see that as a block. It goes back to the argument that we do not need to invest less in refurbishments, but we need to invest more in new builds.

Deputy John Connolly: Does the national committee get data on how many sites are overcrowded?

Mr. Niall Crowley: It is hard to get that data. I have not seen data in that area, but we know that there is significant overcrowding.

Deputy John Connolly: Local authorities must be aware of the risk of that.

Mr. Niall Crowley: Yes, local authorities would have good knowledge of it, so that is why there is pressure to build.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I will be as brief as I can. I am curious about the different local authorities and the NTACC's interactions with them. It is supposed to advise the Minister in terms of accommodation and so on, yet some local authorities do not have Traveller-specific accommodation. Is that conveyed to the Minister? Is that something the NTACC would raise with the Minister? Different local authorities have washed their hands of anything to do with Traveller accommodation and otherwise.

Another thing is the issue with the halting sites, mainly the bays. I will give Mr. Crowley examples: St. Margaret's, St. Joseph's and Avila Park, although Avila Park is more group housing, as we would call it. These were originally set up as transient halting sites. People would pull in and come out. That is no longer the case. They have been made permanent as such. What is the NTACC's position regarding that? We have most of the issues with the caravan loan scheme in these sites. As Mr. Crowley said, more money is being spent on refurbishment and that is what is going on. There is very little in terms of accommodation. I think we have been waiting about seven or eight years for three units to be built in Avila Park, and I have been on and on about this for years. The site is there, and it is absolutely appalling that it has not been dealt with.

There are a lot of people on these sites, and Mr. Crowley has spoken about the refurbishments. What about the people with disabilities in these places? These seem to be neglected in a big way, and they are not catered for in some of the cases. A lot of these caravans that are being purchased are not disability friendly. The local authorities are very reluctant to buy them and to do them up. I am curious about this matter.

We have an ongoing issue of overcrowding. Avila Park is an example of that. We recently had an incident there where people tried to expand out, but there is no room for expansion at Avila. There is even no room for expansion in St. Margaret's, yet the population has grown and the demands are massive. We have no record, and we do not know what we require in terms of accommodation. Mr. Crowley said that the NTACC did not have records. We have people taking up housing assistance payment, HAP, rental accommodation scheme, RAS, and rent supplement. The Traveller community is being broken up in many ways as a result of this.

It is quite worrying. There are Travellers on the local authority list and some are with approved housing bodies, with leases of 25 years or whatever. That is scandalous. We should have more Traveller-specific accommodation. There is too much money directed towards refurbishment. I am not saying that it is not needed, but the emphasis is far too much on that and not on providing new accommodation and new sites if necessary to keep communities together. That is very important.

Mr. Niall Crowley: Where to start there? The issue of Travellers with disabilities has been a focus of the NTACC. The Deputy should keep in mind what the NTACC is. It is an advisory committee that meets four times a year.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I understand that.

Mr. Niall Crowley: It is important to acknowledge that, and that is one of the reasons for strengthening national governance. Certainly, Travellers with disabilities have been a concern. The focus has been on the caravan loan scheme and the design of accommodation in particular, but it can also be in terms of homeless services as well. The Deputy is right on it being an issue, and it has not been adequately responded to.

Groups being broken up is an issue. I referred to two types of interaction and only mentioned one. If we move towards the construction of group housing within wider social housing estates, it is important to acknowledge intercultural communities and, therefore, build intercultural interactions that are positive between Travellers and settled people.

Likewise, in communities with a Traveller site but where there are Travellers living in standard housing around the area, we need to invest in not breaking up the community or, to put it more positively, in community interactions. One of the points that was made at the conference was the importance of the community centres on Traveller sites as a service to the Travellers on the site but also as a service to the Traveller community in the local area and as a space for local settled people to interact as well. The issue of not breaking up is very important

Deputy Dessie Ellis: One of the reasons we are putting three bungalows into Avila Park is because we are demolishing the community centre because of overcrowding. The fact that we do not have community centres is a disaster. We do not have the space. The same thing is happening in Saint Margaret's and other sites. It is very frustrating as the demands from the communities to expand are so great. We talk about putting money in refurbishment and that is all well and good but we need to build the proper places where we keep the community together. What is happening at the moment is that more apartments are being built. That would be a disaster for any community but specifically for the Traveller community, which has horticulture and all these different things that are required for its culture. It is all apartments now and we need to be careful that we can cater for Traveller communities on these sites.

Mr. Niall Crowley: I do not think the NTACC would make the argument to reduce funding and refurbishment but it is to increase funding and new builds. The Deputy mentioned the rental accommodation supplement, which has come up a bit and the particular issues for Travellers in terms of discrimination in the private rented sector. This is quite a significant barrier, which means that scheme does not serve Travellers well. That is one reason we have emphasised the Equal Status Acts and the breach of those Acts.

Senator Eileen Flynn: I thank members for their input this evening. The questions asked have been critical. I thank Mr. Crowley for coming before the committee this evening. He has been a friend to Travellers for many years and his record in human rights and equality has always shone through for me as an activist and somebody from the Traveller community. Mr. Crowley has a very interesting profile and I encourage members to look him up. He is very powerful when it comes to equality. Some of the personal sacrifices that Mr. Crowley have made shows truth to his own character. It is important to say that because usually we have people in here who I believe pretend to care but I know Mr. Crowley does care 100% for our community.

The expert review was published in July 2019, which is nearly seven years ago. Its programme board was established in 2021 to implement the recommendations. This was five years ago. Mr. Crowley told us about the process on the report, the conference, the researchers, subgroups and consultations. How many new Traveller-specific accommodation units have been built since 2019? I am not talking about refurbishment. I am talking about new builds because Traveller families are still living in overcrowded conditions and a lot of Travellers are homeless. What does the report turn into roofs over people's heads? I do not see much action and to the best of my knowledge, there have been no new builds from the local authorities. I am aware of new builds from Cluíd and from Culturally Appropriate Homes, CENA, but I am not aware of any new builds from local authorities in this country since 2019.

I need to say that it is really unfortunate. I know for a fact that Travellers in Ballyfermot - I cannot speak about every Traveller around the country - have been forced to move out of the sites. We are seeing it in Saint Margaret's, Avila Park and Dunsink Lane. I know Dunsink Lane is not an official halting site and nor is Labre Park. Labre Park is an unofficial halting site. It is the oldest halting site in the country and the redevelopment I have been part of since I was 17 years of age - I am now 36 - has just been let go. No redevelopment has taken place in Labre Park. Where did that go wrong? From the local consultative committees, how can we stand by that for the residents in Labre Park, who are absolutely devastated? This is not just an issue for one halting site. Travellers are being pushed out of halting sites. In the next five to ten years, there are going to be no halting sites. What is happening around the country, and Mr. Crowley probably knows this better than any of the members, is that they are trying their best to make Travellers fake settled people. They continue to do that and nobody is held accountable for local authorities not drawing down the funding. I have all the respect in the world for Mr. Crowley, who is chairperson of the NTACC, but he has no power to fix these broken local structures. What is the point of the NTACC if it cannot hold local authorities accountable for their failures? Does it just involve meetings and whitewashing? I am sorry; I just get so emotional because I see Travellers being pushed out of where they live. I am seeing it right now in Labre Park and there is nothing I or anybody else around this table can do about it. It is the local authority. The local authority can fail Travellers, put Travellers out of halting sites, etc., and not be held accountable. The 1998 Traveller accommodation Act is 28 years old. We talk about transient sites and the right to be able to travel. That is still not working. Mr. Crowley's opening statement said research has been commenced on transient sites but Traveller families know they need space for caravans and horses. Even talking about the Traveller caravan loan scheme, it is a Traveller trailer loan scheme because Travellers do not use the word "caravans". We say "trailers". The Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative

Committee, LTACC, reports make it clear that current accommodation fails to support these cultural practices.

Why, after, 28 years is there still no justice when it comes to meeting Travellers' rights and Travellers' needs when it comes to accommodation? I would like to think that I sound more passionate than emotional but I cannot help to think I was once that young person. Yesterday, we were talking about the fuel crisis. I know what it is like to live in a cold house. I know what it is like to not be able to go to school because you got no sleep, you did not have hot water to be able to wash or you did not have a way of washing your clothes. That is still a sad reality. All these crises that we are seeing at the moment such as the cost of living, the fuel crisis and heating our homes, Travellers are probably one of the most impacted groups in the country. When you speak up about it, you get attacked by people, idiots from the far right. Again, they are not attacking you for your work, they are attacking you based on your identity.

I have asked a few questions there. In my opinion, the national Traveller consultative committee is not working and should be abolished. I understand Mr. Crowley chairs it and everything else that goes with that but I would love his honest opinion. I know it is really hard to be in here with two hats. He is in here as an independent chairperson. I would love if that hat could come off and he could be really honest with us in this committee this evening. What can and what should be done for Travellers when it comes to something that is not working and that has continued for the last 28 years to fail our community? I have no doubt it will continue to fail our community.

Mr. Niall Crowley: I thank the Senator for the kind words and the challenging questions. I will start with Labre Park maybe and will maybe put another hat on. Before I was appointed as independent chair of the NTACC, I was invited to chair the regeneration committee in Labre Park. That was a remarkably new development by a local authority, that is, to create a regeneration committee, put in place a regeneration worker, to identify a project manager for the project and to do a social, economic and cultural plan for the site, as well as a refurbishment plan. That is the norm in the regeneration of apartment blocks and social housing estates. For the first time that was being done in relation to regeneration of Traveller group housing. For me that was really dramatically a source of hope. I think the story Senator Flynn recounts then is one of hope being killed, really, in many ways, and in quite a disturbing manner. I joined in 2021 after the first regeneration plan collapsed. In 2018, Clúid published a regeneration plan for Labre Park with very good co-design and participation of the residents, a moment of significant hope. In 2020, that collapsed because the engineering and drainage department in Dublin City Council said it is on a flood plain and you cannot build new stock on the flood plain. That was then revised by Clúid and reduced in scale but it was revised to put in flood defences and to deal with contaminated land in a better manner. In 2022, the revised proposal was agreed and went to the Department of housing and local government, where it collapsed again - the second collapse - because it said it would not able to fund the flood plain protection and the contaminated land. At that point, Clúid did a further redesign and restricted the flood plain work to just around the site, not the whole area, and developed a new approach to dealing with the contaminated land very positively. At the end of last year, that went to the Department for funding, presumably with the agreement of everybody in Dublin City Council. We have just heard now in 2026 that the project has collapsed again because the engineering and drainage department are saying it cannot be built on a flood plain. That is a devastating decision. That was the word the Senator used. I agree. I would not use it often but I think it

was a devastating decision. I cannot understand it in terms of how that happened, that is, how you could move from a model of really interesting good practice with real hope and then see it go full circle and collapse again. Trust is gone and hope is gone. It is a desperate way to abandon a community. There is an LTACC meeting tomorrow. It is an item on the agenda tomorrow. Certainly we have to look and see what explanations and solutions are given. It is very hard to hold on to that.

Senator Eileen Flynn: Ballyfermot Travellers Action Project will be in here next week. Pavee Point was invited and has a slot; it is going to give to BTAP to come in to discuss the redevelopment of Labre Park. A lot of questions need to be asked but I also am aware that apparently the chief is saying that it is on pause. It is not on pause, however. If they are refusing to build, that is not paused; that is refusing to build. I wanted to share that with the committee.

Mr. Niall Crowley: Yes, we have to get answers from the LTAC committee. We will know more tomorrow in a way. There is a suggestion that it might be in two phases whereby we would refurbish what is there and build later but having gone through that cycle of collapses - with it getting smaller each time - I fully agree it is really hard to have any form of optimism in it. Just to acknowledge BTAP as well, the regeneration committee was made up of a residents' committee, BTAP and Dublin City Council. All played really positive parts. It was a very interesting space to be as independent chairperson, where I really felt people were working together. To see it fall apart around us is disturbing.

With that story in mind, on the Senator's question about the programme board and the timing, we had the report in 2019, the programme board in 2021 and in 2026, we are still struggling with the main recommendations. That is way too slow. On the ones that could make a difference, the way they approached it - correctly I think - was to pick the simpler ones first and work towards the big ones but it is moving very slowly. The big ones are what will emerge in terms of new governance arrangements at local and national level, that is, what will emerge in terms of new LTACCs and a new NTACC or whatever at national level. That is probably the most important one because that is the driver. The second big one is the new design guidelines. We have not seen them yet. It will be very important that they live up to the work that is being done by the programme board in terms of co-design and culturally appropriate design, and that they are first published and agreed and second implemented. That is very important. While more research is a pain in the neck all right, the transient site research could be quite useful in terms of trying to capture where nomadism is now and where transient sites are now. It also might give a launching pad for a new focus because it needs a launching pad. It is too difficult to move at the moment. At a lower level, there is the data work which could be interesting in terms of getting real data and the eviction protocol. None of them are over the line yet in that way. I cannot but agree that it is way too slow.

In terms of what the point is, I have to answer that question myself in respect of my decision to continue. Certainly the Senator sees that progress is way too slow. If there was another way to make a difference, I certainly would be tempted. I put some hope in the possibility that we might get something through and over the line in relation to the governance papers and in terms of design guidelines. The language used around the design guidelines, that this could be a game-changer, was interesting.

In the context of the NTACC, there is no doubt that a game-changer is needed in terms of governance, design and provision.

An Cathaoirleach: I have a couple of questions. I was a county councillor for 20 years before I came to this campus. In relation to local authority budgets, we seem to consistently hear stories about local authorities returning unspent moneys. However, in Wexford, where we have Traveller accommodation that is inadequate and poor and that has not been invested in, we find ourselves in a situation whereby getting the smallest of things we request is like pulling teeth. There seems to be a perception that the Traveller accommodation budget is purely for Traveller accommodation and that if we do not build houses or anything else, the money all goes back to where it came from. In the context of Mr. Crowley's experience, what is the scope of the Traveller accommodation budget? There seems to be either confusion about or avoidance of the subject People are living in chronic conditions, yet moneys are being returned to the Department unspent. On the scope of the Traveller accommodation budget made available to local authorities, what should and could money be spent on outside of Traveller accommodation? I refer here to actual physical accommodation.

Mr. Niall Crowley: The issue of returning unspent money has changed in that, as part of the programme board work, some of the new systems relating to managing funds-----

An Cathaoirleach: When I say unspent, I mean that it is not drawn down. It is not returned as such; it is never drawn down.

Mr. Niall Crowley: It is not drawn down by local authorities.

An Cathaoirleach: Yes.

Mr. Niall Crowley: It is spent at least, but things do not progress. That is certainly an issue across a number of local authorities, and it is the issue in terms of inadequate levels of building, in a way, and the fact that projects are not progressing.

I do not think there are issues in relation to the scope of the budget. I am of the view that budget should be increased and that we need to keep an eye on new builds in the context of that. However, the budget design probably works in a way. Where this has come up a little is around who pays for culturally specific dimensions to the accommodation. I certainly hope we might look into that.

An Cathaoirleach: I am dealing with a halting site in County Wexford. The investment in it is minuscule. Sometimes, even in the context of the slightest improvements requested, I am coming up against a brick wall. There is a reluctance or an avoidance when it comes to investing. The site in question was condemned a couple of years ago. At the same time, there are still people living there and experiencing difficulties with rodent infestations. The smallest request seems to be the biggest ask, for want of a better description.

On the caravan loan scheme, does Mr. Crowley find it unusual that in the context of social housing support - and Traveller accommodation is a social housing support - only one sector of the community is essentially asked to take out loans for their accommodation? Is that something that has ever been discussed at the committee in the context of equality and fairness?

Mr. Niall Crowley: The caravan loan scheme, without a doubt, is a burning issue for the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee. It is clearly one that is seen as

hugely important in terms of a culturally appropriate response to Traveller accommodation, and is welcomed as such. The shift from a pilot scheme to a full scheme is welcome. Certainly, the experience so far is that the demand is far greater than the supply in terms of the funding that is available.

An Cathaoirleach: It just seems unusual-----

Mr. Niall Crowley: I will come to-----

An Cathaoirleach: Sorry.

Mr. Niall Crowley: With that in mind, there are questions being asked of the NTACC, without a doubt. The NTACC will have to try and come to a position in respect of the design of the scheme. One of those questions relates to the loan nature of the scheme. Some of the loans are repaid out of the normal rent people pay for social housing, but the issue still remains in that there are elements that people still need to pay themselves. There are steps people have to go through in order to obtain loans. Applicants are required to go through steps that people in social housing are not, and that has been raised as an issue. How the NTACC will respond to that, I cannot predict.

An Cathaoirleach: This is the committee's first meeting in respect of its accommodation pillar. We have a number of pillars in respect of which we will be meeting. We have just concluded our health and mental health pillars. We will be bringing people in who are working within the area. Any contribution Mr. Crowley feels the NTACC could make in respect of the accommodation pillar would be most welcome. His presence here has been extremely helpful and informative. I hope he did not find some of the questioning overly robust and that he considers this to have been a friendly interaction.

There is a long road to go before we find a situation where county councils, central government, the various Departments and the relevant individuals and officials are doing what is requested and required of them. It is our job, as an Oireachtas committee, to ensure our input is as strong as possible.

I thank Mr. Crowley very much for his contribution. We look forward, hopefully, to working with him on other days in the future.

Mr. Niall Crowley: I thank the Chair. I appreciate the connection, because the NTACC wants to be connected. That is very valuable.

An Cathaoirleach: Mr. Crowley is certainly pushing an open door.

The joint committee adjourned at 8.17 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. Thursday, 23 April 2026.