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, 16 Iúil 2026

Thursday, 16 July 2026

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:

John Connolly,	Joe O'Reilly,
Dessie Ellis,	Anne Rabbitte.
Séamus McGrath,	
Naoise Ó Muirí,	
Maurice Quinlivan.	

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

The joint committee met in private session at 12.37 p.m., suspended at 12.56 p.m. and resumed in public session at 12.58 p.m.

Traveller Accommodation: Discussion (Resumed)

An Cathaoirleach: Apologies have been received from Senator Noonan.

This meeting is to discuss the issue of Traveller accommodation with representatives from Wexford Local Development, Wexford Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee, and Ferns Diocesan Youth Service. From Wexford Local Development we are joined by Ms Marie Louise Byrne, community development co-ordinator. From Wexford Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee our witnesses are Ms Elizabeth Berry from the Gorey district; Ms Kathleen Connors, Rosslare district; Ms Mary Connors, New Ross district; and Ms. Mary Mongan, Enniscorthy district. From Ferns Diocesan and Youth Service we are joined by Mr. Robbie Sludds, Traveller inclusion project worker. They are all very welcome. We do not have anyone attending remotely.

As the witnesses are within the precincts of Leinster House, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentation they make to the committee. This means 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 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.

The witnesses are very welcome. I have known all of them quite well over many years. I invite them to make their opening statements and we will then proceed to a question and answers session.

Ms Elizabeth Berry: We thank the Chair and members for the opportunity to speak to the committee today. We are here today as the Traveller representatives on the Wexford local Traveller accommodation consultative committee, LTACC, and with our colleagues from Wexford Local Development and the FDYS Traveller inclusion project. I will introduce the LTACC representatives: my name is Elizabeth Berry and I am representing the Gorey district. I am also a Traveller community health worker for north Wexford and I work with Wexford Local Development. I am one of ten community health workers and I have worked with WLD for 16 years. I am joined by Mary Mongan, representing the Enniscorthy district who will talk about issues related to Traveller accommodation, homelessness and the real barriers Traveller families experience, such as the choice-based letting system. Kathleen Connors from Taghmon is representing the Rosslare district. Kathleen will talk about the future for young Travellers and the information available on choices available. Mary Connors, representing the New Ross district is also a nominated representative from the national Traveller organisations. Mary has been a Traveller activist and community health worker for decades and is a long-standing member of the LTACC. She will talk about the importance of reform of how the LTACCs work, if we are to see improvements.

We are also joined by Marie Louise Byrne from Wexford Local Development, who sits on the LTACC in an advisory role to the Traveller representatives in County Wexford. Robbie Sludds is from the Traveller inclusion project in FDYS. Mr. Sludds is based in a community house in Drumgoold, Enniscorthy, which is a Traveller-specific housing scheme with 14 houses. He will talk about accountability in the implementation of plans and policies and consultations Travellers participate in.

I will now pass over to Marie Louise Byrne who will provide some background information.

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach and members for the invitation to highlight some of the issues experienced on the ground at local level. I would like to take this opportunity to provide some background information and to draw attention to the current functioning of the LTACC and the process of developing the Traveller accommodation programme, TAP, and how that happens on the ground.

In terms of numbers, the census recorded 1,441 Travellers living in County Wexford which is the eighth highest population in Ireland and the highest in the south east. However, based on Wexford County Council's annual count, 784 Traveller families were identified at the end of 2024. This would indicate a much higher population. Services on the ground such as ourselves in FDYS estimate the figure to be closer to 3,000, which is double the number recorded in the census, which is important to note. There are two halting sites in County Wexford, Mountain View in Bunclody and Marshmeadows in New Ross. They are not transient sites and many families have lived on the sites for decades. There are approximately 46 families living in group housing schemes across the county.

WLD works in partnership with Travellers. In County Wexford there is not yet a Traveller-led organisation, so community development initiatives are shared across several stakeholders. We have a very active Traveller interagency group, which deals with education, employment, health and other issues apart from accommodation because that is left to the LTACC. WLD programmes such as the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, and the empowering communities programme, which operates in Bunclody, prioritise community work with Travellers. We also host two Traveller primary healthcare projects. Ms Berry works on the north Wexford one.

In relation to the LTACC, my own role for over ten years has been to support Traveller representatives to participate in a meaningful, and not tokenistic, way. This is part of broader community development work with Travellers across the county that focuses on empowerment, leadership, equality, social justice and anti-racist practice and that uses the public sector human rights and equality duty as a tool.

The LTACC is a valuable statutory structure that allows members of the community to engage with elected representatives and officials. Despite the numerous challenges to the functioning of the LTACC, the desire is not to disband the LTACCs but to reform them – especially with regard to the mandate and purpose of LTACCs, as well as reform of how the Traveller accommodation programme is developed.

In relation to the consultation process for the TAP, my colleagues on the community development team in WLD facilitated listening groups during the summer of 2024. This involved a blend of direct outreach in Traveller-specific housing schemes, such as Drumgoold where Mr. Sludds works, and meetings with established Traveller groups in their local

communities such as Clonroche, Taghmon, New Ross, Enniscorthy and Bunclody. We used community development methodologies to set a format to set the scene and explain the context for the consultation and to seek the input of Travellers on specific issues related to the provision and maintenance of accommodation. We focused on three specific issues including the different types of housing and culturally appropriate options available to Travellers and access to information about accommodation and related services. We also sought ideas as to how access to housing and accommodation services for Travellers could be improved.

A further consultation meeting was held in September to present and seek final feedback on the outcome of the consultation. The attendance and active engagement of two members of the staff of Wexford County Council housing section at this meeting was welcomed and very positively received.

The resulting submission was made by WLD in partnership with Traveller community representatives in response to the draft TAP for 2025 to 2029. A full copy of this submission has been provided to the committee clerk. There were a number of procedural recommendations including specific points in relation to consultation, representation, recognition of culture, access to information, access to related services, climate justice, health-environment and fire safety, the public sector duty and IHREC equality reviews, as well as in relation to budgets and plans and the need for more standardised reporting at a local level including numbers of new units, vacant bay or unit refurbishments, capital and current expenditure, etc. Examples of these recommendations included: a minimum of four full quorum meetings of the LTACC to take place each year; an annual schedule of LTACC meetings set out at the start of each calendar year; nomination of Traveller representatives to be carried out in collaboration with Traveller support organisations, and not via the PPN, as had been the case in the previous LTACC; the monitoring of accommodation preferences of Travellers on an ongoing basis through the LTACC; and the tracking and monitoring of data on Travellers living in emergency accommodation, that is, homeless. The TAP does not give us any numbers for Travellers in emergency accommodation yet we know Travellers were living in emergency accommodation at the time so the reporting paradoxes are hard for us to understand.

I will give one example of the failing of very basic procedures. In 2026 there has been one meeting of the LTACC, in February. A scheduled meeting in April was cancelled and we have not had a rescheduled meeting. Minutes of the February meeting have not yet been circulated. This one example of the lack of purpose and mandate and the failure of basic operational procedures. It is very difficult for Traveller representatives to remain motivated to participate on the LTACC when we are accepting this as normal.

In my opinion, the call by national organisations for a dedicated national Traveller accommodation authority with real powers to oversee delivery and monitor budgets and spending to ensure that standards and targets are met and to support local capacity must be seriously considered if anything is to change.

We have entered into a collaboration with the HSE, very much led by the HSE and ourselves, with Wexford County Council to do a piece of research into the living conditions of 50 Traveller and 50 Roma families in the Enniscorthy municipal district. That is being done with Roma families in Tipperary and Waterford. We will be the first county to look at doing it with Travellers and Roma. We will use the findings of this research as a lever to address health and

related accommodation needs using the lens of the public sector duty to develop an implementation plan. This project is in procurement at the moment and should start in September.

I will now hand over to Mary Mongan who will give a brief input about culturally appropriate accommodation, homelessness and the real barriers families are experiencing.

Ms Mary Mongan: I am representing the Enniscorthy district. I will start by speaking about culturally appropriate accommodation.

From my experience of being homeless with my husband and a young family it is not nice or easy. My children miss out on so much, most importantly their education. I have experience of both homeless accommodation and emergency housing. It is difficult to understand and manage the system. When living in emergency accommodation you must stay in the property at all times, and you are not allowed to stay away for even one night. You must ask permission to visit sick relatives. I am a Traveller and as part of our culture some of us still like to go travelling when the children get their school holidays. People might ask why we travel. We travel to visit family and to keep the children rooted in their culture and traditions. It is not favouritism for Travellers to ask this. Travellers are an ethnic minority, and after years we were finally recognised as an ethnic group by the Government in March 2017.

I turn to the effects of homelessness on parents and children. For parents it is a constant worry of not knowing where you are going to live and in what area you are going to live. Children miss out on their education. They cannot start school because they are being moved around and do not have a permanent address. This is particularly difficult for children with additional needs.

Traveller families experience so many barriers in the system. Choice-based letting is just one example. It is frustrating and difficult to use. While I can read and write and am computer literate, what about people who cannot read or write or use a computer? It is a system I feel is not working and there has to be more support put in place to access the system. Eventually, I got a house through choice-based letting but I was supported by WLD. Another barrier is trying to work and build relationships with so many local authority workers including social workers, social housing liaison officers, Focus Ireland and so on. You feel obligated to work with them. I felt that I could not say no, because if I did it could affect my getting a house. I feel that Traveller families would benefit it there were a Traveller specific housing officer in every county. It should be someone from the Traveller community who understands our culture.

I thank the Chair and members for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to discuss the important topic of Traveller accommodation.

Ms Kathleen Connors: I am here to speak about supports for the younger generation coming up. I have a 17-year-old and a 15-year-old. In another few years, I will be looking forward to them getting married. Where are they going to live? When I got married, I was told I could be between ten and 15 years waiting for a house. It is known that the Travelling community get married much younger than the settled community. We have our own property with plenty of ground, so it is for them to have a mobile. The way Travellers have it now, they can have the family together and my family can stay together on my property. However, is it still the case that we are not allowed to put mobiles in our yard or have caravans in our yard? For me it is about security for my children when they grow up, and it is security for them. It is for me and

them. They are quite young. When they get married, will they have the security? If they get married quite young they will not have an income. If they are expected to go out into the world to pay rent and electric and everything else like food, they cannot do that. I am going back 30 years to when my brothers got married. My family owns its own property. They brought two small caravans onto their own property and got served with fines. They had to move. It was the same with my grandfather before that. They were getting fined if they were not moving. My thing is that the next generation coming up will have some place to go where they can stay with the family so they are together and have the support of their family, and they can support one another.

There is also the issue that the information available on choice-based letting does not work, especially for the Travelling community. There are those who cannot read, do not have phones, do not have Internet or the way to get the Internet if they have phones. You have to be checking that once a week, and if you are not checking that once a week you are taken off. That does not work in the Travelling community whatsoever. If you do not know how to read and write that is definitely not going to work for you, so that definitely has to change.

Mr. Robbie Sludds: I thank the Cathaoirleach and the committee for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Traveller community. I am the FDYS Traveller inclusion project worker for County Wexford, based in the community house in Drumgoold, Enniscorthy, which is a Traveller group housing scheme with 14 houses close to Vinegar Hill. It has a long tradition of being a place where Travellers camped before their houses were built there. I will talk about accountability in the implementation of plans, policies and consultations Travellers participate in. Travellers who take part in groups and activities with our project are often consulted with. While many are open to further consultations there is a crucial need to see action and real change on the ground as a result of these consultations. People will not engage in consultations if they do not see any change. Once consultations are done, Travellers do not often see what happens next, if anything happens. There is little accountability. There are specific issues in relation to how Travellers access accommodation and related information and services.

Many people feel that they are simply not listened to. This is a theme across all consultations or engagement with services. Calls are not returned, emails go unanswered, responses when they come are often vague or unclear and issues that have been reported go unresolved. All of this leads to mistrust and lack of faith felt by members of the community in State services. Options that are available are not clear, given the high levels of literacy difficulties and the increasing previously mentioned reliance on online platforms to access information and services, such as choice-based letting, does not work. There is also the lived experience of ongoing social exclusion within the Traveller community. A lot of work on a daily basis is helping Travellers to access services that should be accessible in the first place.

Travellers want to be listened to by officials and policymakers and to have their concerns fully heard and responded to in a timely manner. This goes well beyond anti-racism and cultural awareness training and meetings, however necessary these are, and into the impact of on how things actually work. In other words, the effectiveness of efforts should not be measured by the amount of training, meetings or consultations but rather by the impact from the perspective and lived experience of Travellers themselves.

The Traveller community has told us what it needs time and time again. What is needed now is not another consultation but accountability that turns Travellers' voices into real action

and lasting change. Ultimately, the success of any policy should be measured not by the number of consultations held but by the difference it makes in the everyday lives of Travellers.

I would like to pass on the floor to Ms Mary Connors.

Ms Mary Connors: I have been a Traveller activist and community worker for what seems like forever. I have been involved in the LTACC in Waterford almost since it was established. I am a member of the National Traveller Women's Forum, the Irish Traveller Movement, Waterford Traveller CDP and most of the other Traveller groups and organisations. It is sort of embarrassing that there is no Traveller organisation in County Wexford, having the third largest population of Travellers in the country. No matter what the figures say, there are an awful lot more Travellers than are reported.

If you are in poor accommodation, you will not be interested in education, training and employment or all the other issues that come with it, or physical or mental health. You will be more interested in getting a safe, dry place for your family. If you have that, then you can work on education, training and employment and all the other issues. Therefore, for me, accommodation is the most important issue that needs to be solved.

I have sat on the LTACC in Waterford for about 20 years. For three or four of those years I was dismissed without knowing it until another person told me they were representing New Ross. I now sit on that LTACC as a representative of the National Traveller Women's Forum because I was dismissed. I rang them up when I found out I had been dismissed and said, "Thanks very much. You could have let me know." About two weeks afterwards, I got a letter: "Thanks very much for all your hard work." That is the way the council treats us. It can pick us up and throw us down and do all the rest, but the one thing about me is that I have staying power. I will keep at it and keep at it. I and other groups have brought on several Traveller reps from different areas in the county and they get fed up of it after two weeks, being talked down to and discriminated against. I have said at LTACC meetings, "I would like that to be minuted", and when I go back the next time it has not been, and I question that. It is not all about me but it is just that I am usually the only one there representing the Travellers because the reps will not stay on the committee because it is too belittling and humiliating.

There are loads of other issues but, for me, accommodation is the main one. The attitude of the council when, as they put it, "dealing with" us is, "You know what this family wants, Mary, but we, Wexford County Council, know what they need." We are the experts. We have been at this for years. Looking back on it, we were all so hopeful in 1998, when the traveller accommodation Act was released, that in five years the Traveller accommodation situation would be totally solved. We knew, as the Traveller groups in Dublin and all the Traveller groups nationally knew, that it was not going to be solved in five years but we thought there would be a strategy there and a plan for maybe the next five or ten years or whatever after that. Where are we now? We are still in the same situation. Like I said, I have sat on the LTACC for years. I sat on the NTACC as well for a couple of terms. I am also involved with a TIG. I do not see us any farther. It is a matter of the attitude of the council, and at times the HSE, education and other bodies, the lack of interest and their attitude towards Travellers. I was at one LTACC meeting when the CEO said, "All down this side of the table are very important, hard-working people." They were the council reps. I had to shout back at him, right or wrong, "You have never seen a busier small woman than me and these people", the Traveller reps on

the other side of the table. That was taken as an insult and the council reps got up and walked out because we answered them back.

Is this going to improve the situation for Travellers? We have been so hopeful so many times, including of equal status. We said, "They cannot discriminate any more now", and then you get the vintners and everybody else and that just went out the window. We were the first in Europe to bring in the smoking ban. We were the first to bring in charging for plastic bags. We look brilliant in Europe. We are outstanding. In our own country, though, with our own people, we are a mess.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank all the witnesses for their opening statements. We will open the floor now to questions and answers.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I welcome our guests. This is a great exercise in that we are focused on one area in a forensic way. Well done to you, Chair, on inviting your neighbours here. They should make sure that you treat them to some hospitality before they go home. They should not let you off without that.

To get to the questions, the third speaker, Ms Mongan, addressed my first question in that she raised the CBL issue. CBL, I know from my clinic work, and my colleagues will probably agree, is working well in a general sense. It is good for a lot of people but, as Ms Mongan says, it is an issue for Travellers. Does she want to be specific as to whether we should do it through professional workers, or what way would she say the county council should get that fairness into CBL such that Travellers can use it? I refer to the letting process.

Ms Mary Mongan: I think the older generation of Travellers - not me or my kids or whatever but people who are older than me - want that bit of communication rather than looking at a phone. I could be wrong, but my father, for instance, would rather go in to see the doctor than talk to them on the phone or look at a screen. Does the Senator know what I mean?

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I do.

Ms Mary Mongan: He is very old school. Travellers are old school. Even if it were once a week, maybe someone could come out or they could go in and be told, "This is what is available", and then someone could help them and ask, "Do you want to bid on this house?". Does the Senator know what I mean? You have to be very careful-----

Senator Joe O'Reilly: It is just to get a practical way of dealing with the difficulty.

Ms Mary Mongan: Say, for instance, I am still in emergency accommodation and I am looking for a house. If I bid on a house that I am not going to take, I am going to be taken off choice-based letting for two years, so you have to be very careful. What about people who do not know how to read or write and do not know what they are at? They might say, "Sure, look, I will chance this anyway, although maybe I do not know what I am at." They may bid on something that they may have no intention of taking and then be two years gone off the list. Does the Senator know what I mean?

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Maybe we should discuss it another day in a specific sense or the recommendation that we could make.

An Cathaoirleach: The choice-based letting was set up initially because of the large number of refusals in local authorities.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Yes.

An Cathaoirleach: That was the case in Wexford which had a couple of them.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: It is working well outside of that difficulty.

An Cathaoirleach: If people need that extra-----

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That is my experience. I do not know what my colleagues would say.

An Cathaoirleach: There is no choice-based letting in Limerick.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: In our office it is working but I do understand the difficulty and that needs addressing.

Ms Byrne speaks to Wexford, I presume, and some of the witnesses speak nationally as well. Does she think that Traveller homelessness is under-reported and under accounted for? If so, then by how much and has she any examples? That is an important issue. Are there examples of the lack of Traveller-appropriate accommodation or homelessness?

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: The numbers we have in the current Traveller accommodation programme have no reference to any Travellers living in emergency accommodation. We work with the national organisations because we do not have the resources to analyse the data at a local level to the extent, say, the Irish Traveller Movement would. As far as I know, at the time of the TAP publication the social housing summary assessment of need recorded that nine Traveller families were living in homeless accommodation around the same period. There is an anomaly in reporting. The LTACC has never recorded the number, but we know through our work on the ground that there are Traveller families living in emergency accommodation.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: My third and fourth questions can be rolled into one. Travellers tend to marry younger than the settled population and that creates challenges with housing. I will link that to my question on the prospects of young Travellers who want accommodation. I ask the witnesses to speak a little to the experience of young Travellers. I have three young sons and they face challenges when they seek accommodation, either rental or otherwise. Will the witnesses speak to the challenges faced by young Travellers if they want to get married or otherwise?

Ms Kathleen Connors: Travellers get married at quite a young age. They want to get married. If my daughter got married in the morning, she would go with her husband's family. She would go to whatever yard or house they may be in. That is a caravan and they are not going to move into the house. If my son got married in the morning, then he will stay in my yard. Travellers get married quite young and have no way of supporting their wife or husband. If my son got a wife, he has no way of supporting her so I have to support him, his wife and their children, if they have them. It is not that we have to keep our children close. In the Traveller community, they go off travelling in the summer. When my children come back, I have their base. I can provide them with security for when they come home.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I will hone in on one specific area and read the question as I have it here. Given the importance placed on marriage and living near family in Traveller culture, how can LGBTQI+ Travellers be accommodated both by their community and through housing policies? Will the witnesses speak to that particular cohort?

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: Both myself and Mr. Sludds work with the youth service, which has LGBT services, but neither of us works specifically in those. The Senator has asked an interesting question. There is Traveller intersectionality. There are Travellers with disabilities, Travellers who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community and Travellers who are lone parents. Overall, if the system works for everybody then it will address some of the issues. The system is so broken for every Traveller and the key is to fix it for everybody, which will include all of those groups where intersectionality is an issue.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I thank Ms Byrne for her interesting response.

Ms Mary Connors: Ms Byrne, Ms Berry and I sit on the local Traveller accommodation consultative committee. The title may be long but it has a lot of meaning. There are also agencies and the Traveller inter-agency group, TIG, but there should not be a need for these organisations. I stand by the LTACC because as I have told them a few times, I am not here to accomplish anything because I know nothing is going to happen but I am here to see what you are at.

The TIG includes people from education, the Garda Síochána and community people. It is a group of agencies. If they were all doing their job, there would not be a need for the TIG because there would be an agency to deal with education, and others for training and employment and accommodation. They could phone or email each other but there should not be a need for these committees if the people on them did their job as they are supposed to. It is the same with the LTACC. With any of these groups, there should not be a need if everyone did their job.

There is one other thing. I have never been arrested in my life but if I did something wrong today I would know, when doing it, that it is wrong and that I can be arrested for that and sent to jail. However, there is no sanctions or comeback for these committees, the local authorities, the HSE, the Department of Education and Youth and all these agencies when they say, "All right, sure that happened. That was years ago and so-and-so was in the job at the time, not us". There is no accountability. I am sorry for giving out about it but that is the situation as we see it.

Deputy John Connolly: I agree with Senator O'Reilly that it is important for the committee to get the perspectives of the people who operate in different local authorities and ascertain how the operation of the LTACC is not standardised across all local authorities. I welcome the personal testimonies given by Mary Connors and Kathleen Connors. I compliment them on describing how they have suffered and gone through periods of homelessness. It is not easy to detail the impact of that on their families and I appreciate them doing that. It is important that we hear it.

I have a few questions on the LTACC. How many members are on the Wexford LTACC?

Ms Mary Connors: I have been a member of the LTACC for about 22 years, apart from the time that I was thrown out and brought back again.

Deputy John Connolly: I have trouble like that as well.

Ms Mary Connors: My departure was not due to an incident. I do not know what it was but it happened. Several times we have managed to get two or three more Traveller representatives to join.

Ms Berry would know more about it because she is involved with primary healthcare. Lately there have been two or three.

Ms Mary Mongan: A few of them have been cancelled.

Ms Mary Connors: They are gone off it again, are they?

An Cathaoirleach: A few of the LTACC meetings have been cancelled.

Deputy John Connolly: That was going to be my next question.

Ms Mary Connors: The representatives - the Travellers.

Ms Elizabeth Berry: There are only three of us, are there?

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: There are five Traveller reps currently. I am there as an adviser but I am not a member so I do not contribute to a quorum. I think there are five local elected representatives and then the council officials and that is it.

Deputy John Connolly: Five elected representatives from the Travelling community and local authority officials. Are there any other community representatives who are not members of the Travelling community? No.

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: Not on the LTACC.

Deputy John Connolly: How often does the LTACC meet in Wexford?

Ms Mary Connors: We met in February, I think.

Ms Mary Mongan: February was the last one.

Ms Mary Connors: It is four a year. It is meant to be every three months.

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: We requested four in a calendar year. So far we have had one.

Deputy John Connolly: That is 2026. Can Ms Byrne recall if it met four times in 2025?

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: No.

Deputy John Connolly: I believe there should be regulation around that. That should standardise how often it meets. Who is the chairperson?

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: The county chairman. It rotates on an annual basis, which is probably not ideal if it is only meeting. The chair of any committee is an important leadership role. In other counties such as Donegal, a Traveller man is the chairman of the LTACC. In having a rotating chair - in some counties it is a two-year term - some chairs show less interest and some are very active.

An Cathaoirleach: That could form one of our recommendations.

Deputy John Connolly: Is it a job the county chairperson gets along with being the chairperson of the county council? Yes.

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: It is a one-year term.

Deputy John Connolly: In Galway city, it is Niall from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. It only met once this year. It did not meet four times last year. There are five

Travelling members of the elected representatives. The chairperson is selected by the members of the county council. It is their role to be the chairperson as well. When Ms Connors was relegated or suspended from membership, does she have any sense of how that occurred?

Ms Mary Connors: Absolutely not.

Deputy John Connolly: To go back to the five Traveller reps-----

Ms Mary Connors: There are very rarely five. It is only lately since the primary healthcare became involved with the LTACC that we have had three or four or sometimes five Traveller reps on it. Before that, it was mainly me.

Deputy John Connolly: Did I hear Ms Connors say she represented the New Ross area?

Ms Mary Connors: I did.

Deputy John Connolly: Are the five Traveller reps who are members all representing an electoral area in the county?

Ms Mary Connors: Yes, in an ideal situation they would. There would be one from north Wexford, one from south Wexford-----

An Cathaoirleach: It would follow the municipal district structure, which it is now, essentially.

Deputy John Connolly: There will be one member of the Traveller community from each electoral distinct. Is that working well?

Ms Mary Connors: No. In terms of having one from each district, you cannot keep people on it because they are humiliated, they are fed up, they see nothing coming out of it and they just say, "Ah Mary, you do it," because they know I have been involved with it for years. They say, "We have been to loads of those meetings, Mary, and nothing came out it. They said one thing and when I went to talk to them again, they said someone told you that on the phone, that was not us." They get apathetic about the whole thing. I cannot blame the people. I would be upset at first when I would say, the equal status Bill is coming out, the Traveller accommodation Act of 1998 is coming out. There is this thing and that thing and they would say, "Ah yeah, Mary, I heard it all before. You go". You cannot blame the people for that because they see nothing coming out of it.

Ms Elizabeth Berry: For one of the LTACC meetings last year, I travelled from Gorey to the meeting on the morning. I was just on the Wexford bridge coming from the Ballycanew direction and I got a phone call that it was cancelled. At a lot of the meetings in the past, a lot of us Travellers would turn up but there was always one or two of the representatives missing. You do not get the agenda until the morning.

Deputy John Connolly: What was the reason the meeting was cancelled that day?

Ms Elizabeth Berry: I am not sure. There was no reason. My boss rang me and said, "Elizabeth, you need to turn around. Where are you? You need to go home."

Deputy John Connolly: In terms of the council officials who attend, on the occasions it has met, was the director of housing there?

Ms Elizabeth Berry: No.

Deputy John Connolly: I assume the county manager would not be there.

Ms Elizabeth Berry: No.

Deputy John Connolly: The director of housing would not be there.

Ms Elizabeth Berry: No.

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: The SEO for housing is there. That would be the highest grade present.

Deputy John Connolly: On the Traveller accommodation plan, is an update provided at every meeting on the implementation plan?

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: No. That is what we are calling for. We are calling for oversight of delivery and monitoring of budgets and spending. The report can get quite confusing because you do not get anything in advance. For instance, my role and that of the community development team is to work in advance with the reps to prepare for the meetings, but you do not get to feed into the agenda and you do not have the minutes of the previous meeting until you are in the chamber. We have a huge list of recommendations around procedure. We were told they are all operational and they will be agreed at LTACC level. For instance, it would be to have a meeting in Drumgoold where Robbie works, which is a Traveller-specific housing scheme with 14 houses, where people can actually see the issues and Travellers can see the officials as well.

Deputy John Connolly: One purpose of the LTACC should be to build trust between the community and the local authority. If it is not operating effectively, as the experience Ms Connors relayed, it does not help. We have a focus on Wexford but what I am hearing is possibly what I would I hear in other local authorities informally as well. In our recommendations, we need to mandate local authorities to have proper structures around the operation of the LTACCS.

An Cathaoirleach: We can put that in our recommendations.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I thank the witnesses especially for their personal testimonies. The meeting today is about accommodation but other issues also affect the Traveller community. I believe a lot of that goes back to accommodation - mental health, poor health outcomes, unemployment and suicide. It is all linked to the lack of adequate accommodation.

We have heard their testimonies before from different people with similar types of issues - I feel like we are going around in a loop and I am only on this committee for probably less than a year at this stage. We are frustrated that there does not seem to be any action. What change would the witnesses make tomorrow to help deliver accommodation for Travellers? What is the simplest thing they would do?

Ms Mary Connors: Make people responsible for what they are supposed to be doing, what they take on to do. Make them responsible. There have to be sanctions. Like I said a while ago, you have to be responsible for your actions or your inactions. You hear it every day of the week on the TV and radio. I am the manager or I am the director so I take full responsibility for this and I resign. People have to be responsible. I am sure people are well paid for what

they do. They may do it in part but not as regards Travellers. There is always the attitude that there is a housing crisis in the country. Our answer to that is, there is a housing crisis and we are very sad about that.

It is terrible that people are living on the streets. However, why is there a Traveller interagency group? Why is there an LTACC? If they were not needed, they would not be there. Great thinking went into establishing those groups but they just never took off.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The problem is there is no accountability from the group. There is no agenda in the morning.

Ms Mary Connors: They can do what they like.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: It is appalling to give an agenda on the morning of a meeting, for instance, when you are on the way and probably just parking your car and then the meeting is cancelled. That is no way to treat people. It shows utter contempt for people to cancel a meeting, unless it was an emergency. I do not understand and I do not understand why they are not given an agenda either.

I do not want to get bogged down on the small stuff but the LTACCs need to work properly and there has to be some accountability. Are there any other suggestions anybody would offer if the Government was to make a change of policy? For instance, I was on the Traveller committee years ago when I was on the council in Limerick. I can repeat the experiences we have heard here. The committee did not meet properly. It was never there. I think I was the only public representative who ever turned up to it. It was depressing. What would witnesses like to see happening quickly?

Ms Kathleen Connors: I would like for the council to speak to the people and listen to what they want because there is no point in saying they have got somebody a house and where it is, when the person does not want to be there or there are no family members there or it is not where they are from. The council says, "This is your house, there is your key, that is it. Good luck. We sorted you out." We have heard many times about the council giving someone a house, saying they are going to fix this, that and the other thing and do stuff to it, but then that is it. There is no more communication from the council. They have phoned you and that is it, good night. The council needs to sit and talk to Travellers and ask what they want and, if they could do anything for the Travellers, how they could help.

There is no point in putting people somewhere and saying that person is then sorted, they are out of the way and that it is grand when they are not happy there, they do not want to be there or they are in the wrong place. The council can put someone who needs special care or has disability needs in the wrong place, in the wrong house and then the council does not come back or does not have any communication with those people again.

Mr. Robbie Sludds: Success should be measured by outcomes. After all is said and done, there is a lot more said than done. Travellers, from where I am based at the heart of the community, listening to them, day in and day out, are tired. They do not care about the acronym that hangs over someone's head. They want to see people who can actually make a difference in their lives. I hope today is not in vain because I have to go back and talk to those people to let them know something valuable is going to be done for them. At the end of the day, 20-odd years Ms Connors has been sitting on this and the rest of those sitting here are showing up all

the time for the people they represent, every single day, including me. I would love to see something of value come out of the LTACC or some change that is going to make a difference in the Traveller community. They were recognised as an ethnic minority in 2017 but I feel they are not respected as a culture going forward.

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: On the question of something that could change on a national policy level, I know we will not see quick change on the ground but we really have to look at a change at structural level. National oversight is needed. I am a community worker. We always want power at the lowest level and the principle of subsidiarity. However, in this case, it is not working. It is 25 years of something not working. Without national oversight, I cannot see it changing.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: That was going to be my next question, believe it or not. The Department will come in here, the County and City Management Association, CCMA, will come in and other local authorities will come in here and tell us that they spend their Traveller accommodation money every year. Anybody I speak to or whom my colleagues speak to does not see anything being done in their area. Where is that money going? We do not know where that money is going. I do not ever believe in taking away powers from local government, but in this case I think we have to. In this case, there has to be a national authority that makes sure Traveller accommodation is implemented, and without that, we are on a hiding to nothing. A number of people would agree with me on that. I do not know of any new Traveller site built in Limerick in years. I imagine that is replicated across the country. I hope our recommendations include some sort of national authority that makes sure Traveller accommodation money is spent properly. I thank everyone for coming here today and I appreciate their comments.

An Cathaoirleach: I am conscious there is a vote in the Seanad.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: That is okay. While everybody was talking, I was doing a little bit of googling. Believe it or not, in 2019, the Traveller accommodation expert review was commissioned and one of the main recommendations was that there be an independent chair. We should lean back into this because, if there is an independent chair, their function is to ensure the meetings happen and that everybody is getting their agenda and minutes on time. There is a structure. There is accountability. It is transparent. That is one of the first recommendations I would be putting forward.

An Cathaoirleach: It should be for a fixed five-year term at least.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: It absolutely should. I certainly think that. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. It was done in 2019. We actually just need to see it operationalised.

An Cathaoirleach: It appears it is done in other areas as well.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Absolutely. That is the inequity of it all. When we talk about transparency, we need to have a barometer of every one of the local authorities to see how many meetings are happening. In my local authority, their meetings have not gone up online since 2019. That just shows the inefficiencies around the transparency of Traveller accommodation. I am from Galway. Deputy Connolly is from the city and I am from the county.

That speaks to the part about culture and the changing culture. We went into that a few times and Ms Mongan spoke about culture. Everybody has talked about culture. It is the cultural piece of the system not recognising. Would Ms Mongan like to speak to that? She talked about homelessness and overcrowding. I know there is a big issue within the Traveller community that overcrowding is not seen as being a homelessness issue. I might have to run out the door to the Seanad in a minute, but I just wanted to get in that.

Ms Mary Mongan: I cannot speak for every Traveller; I can only speak for myself and my family. I am one of three. I have only two sisters. My mother and father are in a small three-bedroom bungalow. I had a mobile home in their yard. It is still there but it is not liveable in. There is no heating. There is no proper running water. It just was not habitable. I have children with additional needs. I have five children. My sister has three. She and her husband live with my mother and father. My other sister, who is not married, my mother and father, my sister who is married and her three children are all living in the house. When the mobile home was not habitable for me, I did live with my mother and father for a few weeks. It was not working. It was very hectic. Seven of us and eight of them made 15 people in the one small bungalow. Nobody plans to become homeless. I found myself travelling back and forth so I had a bed to sleep in. I was sofa surfing. My husband is from Offaly. I did not want to stay too long on top of anyone. I was back and forward. The children missed out on so much. They really did, and I felt guilty for that because I am all for education.

My mother taught me to read and write and I did what I could with them so they would not fall behind and stuff, but the overcrowding is not talked about enough. Where would I go? Take for instance my mum and dad's yard. Where else would I go? You are not going to get a housing assistance payment, HAP, house. Nobody is going to rent to Travellers. If they think you are a Traveller they are not going to rent you a property so you have to try to get social housing. That is the only way out. I was not a priority when I lived in the yard, even though I had children with disabilities. I had a social worker from the council come out to me and say I was not a priority because I was practically housed when I was living in a yard and even though, as I said, there was no proper running water. I would have to go into the house to wash myself and use mum's house for washing clothing. There was no proper heating except maybe an electric heater, which is not good. It is dangerous to be plugging in an electric heater when you have to unplug the kettle first and unplug the heater if want to boil the kettle. It is so dangerous as well. A couple of times the plug nearly melted. I am sorry, I am probably rambling a bit so I will leave it there.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: No, not at all. While we talk about homelessness, there is a hidden group experiencing overcrowding within the Traveller community and it would be great if we could focus on that. I thank Ms Mongan for sharing her story but it is a widespread story among the Traveller community that needs to be understood. In the cultural response from officialdom she was not recognised as having a priority need, even though she did not have access to running water.

Ms Mary Mongan: Yes. It is just basic human rights. Everyone should be entitled to it. You take for granted that at the flick of a switch you can have electricity and heating. I am housed now anyway and that is the main thing.

Ms Elizabeth Berry: When the younger generation, who have just married and are doubling up in the backs of yards and so on, try to move out and get rented accommodation their

surnames can be an issue. Connors is a very big surname in Wexford and when they know that the family has the Connors name it is a "No" straight away. They say the accommodation has been given out or whatever. It is the same with the halting sites. I can only talk about Bunclody but I assume New Ross is the same. They are meant to be temporary but people are just pushed in there and never given houses. For the next generation coming up who want houses there is no movement. People are just stuck there for years. There is no moving on whatsoever. That is their forever home but they were not promised that going in.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank everybody for coming in. I want to come back to the organisation of the LTACC. Who do the witnesses think would be the right chair? Clearly there is an issue with having a new chair every year in terms of continuity. What is best for the LTACC? Do the witnesses have any strong views? I do not mean about a particular individual. We talk about an independent chair but the trade-off there is we want to put the onus squarely on Wexford County Council to get itself in gear. What is the best route?

An Cathaoirleach: Does it have to be member of the Travelling community or does it have to be-----

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I have an open mind. I want to hear.

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: I will quickly speak to that because I have a view of the national picture, as Mary does too, from talking to the national organisations. There are different situations across the country. It is not always the cathaoirleach of the county council. I was told initially that is the way it is and I, no more than anyone else, will accept that until you hear different and you wonder. Obviously, I have never seen the terms of reference.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: That was my next question.

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: I was thinking about it over the last couple of days and I am not sure I asked for it either. That speaks to the procedure and whether there is an induction process or any sense of training. Training and development is an ongoing thing. Ms Berry is a trained trainer and does the Traveller cultural awareness training and the anti-racism training. That would have to be scheduled in. Procedural things may sound boring and irrelevant but they are incredibly important for a functioning entity. If you do not have the basics right then-----

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Yes, 100%. What is the view on the issue of the chair?

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: The people who are on the LTACC are best placed to decide. It has to be looked at on a national level as to whether it is an independent chair or from the body of members. I am pretty sure the current rotating chair system is not the most effective.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Okay.

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: I do not know what everybody else thinks, but I am reluctant to offer a view because there are different situations in different areas. An independent chair would be difficult if there is nobody but the elected representatives and the Traveller representatives, based on the current structures. The Housing Agency is doing research on the functioning of the LTACCs at the moment.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Ms Byrne mentioned terms of reference. Did anybody ever get terms of reference for the operation of the LTACC in Wexford? The witnesses are saying "No". There were no terms of reference agreed or circulated.

Who would be the most senior Wexford County Council official, not by name but by level, who has participated in the LTACC? Has the county manager or director of services ever shown up? I do not want names, but what is the witnesses' sense of it?

Ms Mary Connors: There was a senior housing officer. I have seen a lot of SHOs in my years involved with the council but it is generally somebody who is going to retire in a year or two and they are shoved in there until they are gone. They last a year or two.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Okay. It is a committee set up by statute so it is a legal committee and its job is to advise the county council on planning for Traveller accommodation, its management, etc. The representatives got a phone call to say the meeting was cancelled at very short notice when the agenda had just arrived, or they did not even get an agenda.

Ms Elizabeth Berry: There was no explanation.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: There was no explanation. I know the answer to this but it is kind of depressing. Do the representatives get plans around-----

Ms Elizabeth Berry: No.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: -----financial budgets or other plans? Are they coming into the LTACC in relation to what Wexford County Council has planned in years one, two and so on?

Ms Elizabeth Berry: No.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Is any of that information brought to the LTACC?

Ms Elizabeth Berry: No.

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: Not on a regular basis. Sometimes one of the elected representatives will specifically ask for numbers. You get the annual count. I do not think we have seen the 2025 one yet. It is difficult when there has only been one meeting. That goes back to the fundamentals.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Yes, but that is the whole point in terms of-----

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: It is about that consistent reporting of targets. I work on a programme that is monitored to the nth degree twice a year. Our funding comes through the local community development committee, LCDC, and the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, and is monitored with respect to targets, financials and everything twice a year in person. We have audits on top of that. There is a huge contrast.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: That is not uncommon.

Ms Mary Connors: And Ms Byrne is responsible for her decisions and actions.

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: Yes.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I agree with what the Cathaoirleach said earlier. Regarding terms of reference, we need to smarten up here. Professionalisation is required. There needs to be terms of reference, clarity on a chair, clarity on regular meetings, no cancelling of meetings at short notice, a clear agenda and that senior officials from the city council are committed.

An Cathaoirleach: I totally agree with the Deputy. The structure suits many county councils at the minute because one meeting a year and cancellation of stuff suits the agenda. There is no focus. They do not necessarily want a focus. That is why this meeting has been vital in providing us with the reality on the ground, which is replicated time and time again. Galway City Council appears to be the outlier. I could be wrong. There could be other councils.

Deputy John Connolly: It quite possibly is. In fairness to Mr. Niall Crowley, my experience of his role in organising the committee was very positive.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: The kind of professional-----

Deputy John Connolly: He was not a councillor. He is not a member of the Traveller community. It was a decision that council management took to appoint someone of his stature to try to make sure that it worked well.

An Cathaoirleach: Does anybody else wish to contribute?

Ms Marie Louise Byrne: If there is to be a restructuring on a national basis, the mandate would be important and it is about the purpose of the LTACC. In the acronym LTACC, one of the C's is for consultative. Is it consultative? There is a bit of ambiguity there. If we go back to the very basics - and sometimes we can overcomplicate things - about what is the purpose and what is this committee's mandate.

An Cathaoirleach: There are a number of issues that we will put into our recommendations. On foot of that, we will invite the relevant Ministers in to issue our recommendations and demand that we see change in this. One of the things we are talking strongly is a national body to oversee Traveller accommodation. While none of us want to see the dilution of local government, the jobs are not being done. We want to remove the whole box-ticking exercise aspect from the LTACCs. For example, it is there, tick the box and we did it. Ms Byrne is right about the consultative piece. What does that mean in the context of delivering results?

The independent chair would be a vital component to our recommendations and to the success of LTACCs going forward for a statutory five-year period. I was cathaoirleach of Wexford County Council. I was chair of the LTACC. You were only getting used to the whole set up when you were gone again. I do not have to tell Ms Mary Connors this, but these things take time. A one-year stint is a waste of time when there are two-, three-, four- and five-year plans. Accountability is crucial as well, as are the mandatory meetings. I would not say the treatment meted out to Ms Berry was an isolated incident. If we went across the country, we would find similar. What we have gleaned from this meeting is that the entire structure of the LTACC has to be changed nationally with a piece in place that we can point to and say, "That is the way the structure should be." This is obviously with consultation. We are not going to be dictatorial in the way we go about it. If we can make recommendations that are informed from having the likes of this meeting, it will go a long way towards improving the situation and being very definite about the direction we want to take it.

Ms Elizabeth Berry: There are all the knocks that we had of going to them. I like going to them to bring back the information. It is just a knock every time and there are not enough of them.

An Cathaoirleach: We will certainly do all we can to improve and change the situation for the better. I thank the witnesses for coming along. We look forward to, perhaps, interacting with some of them again in the future.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.14 p.m. *sine die*.