



Submission to Galway City Council on Draft Traveller Accommodation Programme 2025-2029

February 2024

Introduction

Galway Simon Community (GSC) welcomes the opportunity to submit comments and recommendations to the draft Galway City Council Traveller Accommodation Programme (TAP) 2025-2029. GSC has been providing homelessness services for 45 years and has extensive experience across Galway City in different contexts. We provide a range of services including Homelessness Prevention, Housing and Health and Wellbeing supports in the City.

In the course of our work, we regularly support households from the Traveller Community who are facing homelessness and experiencing difficulties accessing accommodation. Our submission will draw on this experience and expertise and will focus on issues relating to access to emergency accommodation and housing supports, which are particular to households from the Traveller Community.

If we look at the various ways in which the Traveller Community is marginalised in respect of accommodation, health, disability, educational and employment attainment, and the long history of discrimination against Travellers, a strata effect of marginalisation becomes quite clear. There are layers to these various inequalities within this group and these cumulative factors lead to difficulties in accessing housing.

There is a big gap between Travellers' housing and cultural needs and the availability of appropriate accommodation for Travellers. While many of the issues we will raise are also experienced by households not from the Traveller Community, the multiple levels of marginalisation put the Traveller Community at particular risk of (a) an experience of homelessness; and (b) difficulties exiting homelessness.

Current progress in relation to Traveller accommodation is not acceptable and has not achieved equality outcomes for the Traveller community. Despite successive Traveller Accommodation Plans, many from the Traveller community in Galway City continue to live in Emergency Accommodation or substandard conditions which fail to protect and respect their right to adequate accommodation or adhere to minimum standards. These conditions include overcrowding, damp and mould, lack of sanitation or cooking facilities, pest infestations, health and safety issues including fire safety, poor maintenance and lack of safe play areas for children, Carrowbrowne site being a prime example.

There is insufficient Traveller specific accommodation and Traveller homelessness is increasing. Galway Simon Community is familiar with the scale of the accommodation crisis facing members of the Traveller Community. Traveller Families are particularly vulnerable to homelessness. Equally we work with single men and women from the Traveller community who are experiencing homelessness, usually as a consequence of several traumatic events in their lives. As a small population Travellers are over represented in the general homeless population. Census 2016 recorded the rate of Traveller homelessness as 13 times that of general population. As the housing and homelessness crisis worsens the Traveller community continues to disproportionately experience the impacts.

Population & Housing

The number of Irish Travellers living in the State and counted in Census 2022 was 32,949, an increase of 6% from 30,987 in the 2016 census. Irish Travellers make up less than 1% of the population so, for comparison purposes, it can be helpful to use rates per 1,000 of the population. This shows that in Census 2022, six out of every 1,000 people in the State were Irish Travellers. The proportion of Irish Travellers in the population varied from county to county. Galway City Local Authority area has the highest proportion of Irish Travellers in the country at 21 out of 1,000 people.

Traveller families are amongst the poorest families and are therefore largely dependent on Social Housing to meet their Housing need. Census data from 2016 shows that Irish Traveller households had a lower home ownership rate than the general population, with 1 in 5 (20%) households owning their home compared to over two-thirds (67.6%) for the general population. Overcrowding in accommodation was also notable, with nearly two in five Irish Traveller households (39%) having more persons than rooms compared with less than

6% of total households in Ireland. The average number of persons per household was 4 for Traveller households as against 2.7 for all private households.

While Irish Travellers make up less than 1% (0.66%) of the population, they account for nearly 8% (517 out of 6,906) of homeless people according to the 2016 Census. Research carried out by IHREC and the ESRI in 2018 found that this figure is closer to 9%.

The monthly homeless reports published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage do not distinguish households from the Traveller Community. There is also a lack of qualitative research and information on the experiences and the impact inappropriate housing for their needs is having on the Traveller Community. Including the ethnic identifier would enable a more informed consideration of the needs of households from the Traveller Community. Our experience is that members of the Travelling Community can experience greater difficulties accessing Emergency Accommodation and can spend longer periods of time in Emergency Accommodation due to difficulties sourcing appropriate alternative accommodation.

We can see from our day to day work that there are more and more young Traveller families with children falling into Homelessness and becoming entrenched there. Travellers face more obstacles when seeking to secure housing in the private rented market, for a variety of reasons. Difficulties arise because young Traveller families are not sufficiently long on the Housing Waiting List to receive allocations. They are therefore dependent on living with family in what are very often already desperately overcrowded situations. Pressures and difficulties arise making such young families particularly at risk of homelessness. As mechanisms for the delivery of Social Housing have changed we have seen an exponential increase in the waiting times, and ever-increasing levels of family homelessness. A key part of the solution must be to ensure that there is a significant increase in the Social Housing supply that reduces waiting times for everyone.

Why we need to do more?

There are multiple reports (see sample in bibliography), over many years, that demonstrate that key social determinants of health and wellbeing in the lives of Travellers in Ireland are well below the levels of the general population. This is across health, mortality, housing, income, education, community integration.

Through our work, we meet the people behind these reports and statistics every day. And we see that these issues are intergenerational.

When, for example, a family is on a waiting list to get into Emergency Accommodation, and then staying in Emergency Accommodation over a period of years, children are born into homelessness. Children spend their formative years experiencing the instability, and in many cases the trauma, of homelessness. Families can become institutionalised when they become used to being in staffed homeless Services. Children go to school from a 'transitional housing' address, that can identify them as homeless. They can face discrimination, which can exacerbate a sense of insecurity and shame that they may feel from their housing situation.

Exiting homelessness can be particularly challenging for Traveller families. As the delivery of social housing continues to fall well behind targets (and much further again behind need) in recent years, the primary exit route from homelessness (almost 75%) has been through the private rental market in tenancies supported by HAP. In 2022-2024, we are seeing a shrinking in the availability of tenancies available through the private rental market as many landlords exit the 'market'. Supply is diminishing, and rents are increasing. In a very tight market, Travellers are facing even greater challenges than others in securing private rental accommodation and navigating their way out of homelessness. In our experience, Travellers are getting stuck in Emergency Accommodation for longer than other cohorts.

If and when accommodation is secured, further challenges can arise. After a period of years in Emergency Accommodation (and in some cases institutionalisation), families can struggle to settle into a new community and assimilate.

The experience of homelessness has an adverse impact on physical and mental health. The Community Healthcare West (CHO2) Implementation Plan for the National Traveller Health Action Plan (NTHAP) 2022-2027 sets out the vision of the NTHAP ... *“for a health service in which Travellers can achieve their full potential in respect of their physical, mental and social wellbeing and where the wellbeing of all Travellers is valued and supported at every level. The vision is underpinned by one in which Traveller families have equitable outcomes in health resulting in a healthy and resilient Traveller community.”* For these aspirations to be realised, it is imperative that adequate levels of safe, secure, affordable accommodation of an appropriate standard is delivered.

We see daily in our work the impact that the experience of homelessness is having on families, and particularly children, who are entrenched in homelessness. We can see that the children of families we are supporting today will be impacted by the experience of homelessness for years to come. The intergenerational impacts of homelessness will be perpetuated for as long as we fail to address the accommodation needs of the Traveller Community, and we will continue to see negative indicators in respect of health, mortality, housing, income, education and community integration. And the cycle will continue.

If proof were needed, the last decade has demonstrated forcibly that the private market will not deliver adequate levels of safe, secure, affordable social housing – much less culturally specific housing to meet the needs of Travellers.

Therefore, in order to break the intergenerational cycle of homelessness among Travellers, we must deliver more appropriate, affordable accommodation.

For Travellers who are entrenched in homelessness to achieve their full potential in respect of their physical, mental and social wellbeing, they need to have a home.

According to the 2022 Social Housing Needs Assessment, there were 76 Households with ‘Specific Accommodation Requirements’ where the ‘household member(s) is a Traveller’ in the Galway City Local Authority Area. This is not a huge number.

Recommendations

In this next Traveller Accommodation Programme we need to set realistic targets that are based on need.

We need to put a realistic plan in place to deliver those targets.

We need to assess the reasons why we have failed to meet the targets for the last three years, and we need to address the causes of the shortfalls.

We need to put in place robust review periods over the course of the plan.

If we are failing to meet targets, we must put energy and resources behind course correction.

If and when there are changes in the population and levels of need during the course of the plan, then we need to amend the targets and the plans for delivery accordingly.

We must provide more social and affordable housing to arrest the year on year increases that we are seeing in the number of people experiencing the trauma of homelessness across our Community.

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