



Social Justice Ireland's submission to Seanad Eireann re Traveller Participation

June 2019

Contents

Introduction	3
Submission	3
Dialogue and Traveller Social Inclusion	3
Traveller Participation and Politics	6
Conclusion.....	6

Introduction

Social Justice Ireland is an independent social justice think tank that advances the lives of people and communities through providing independent social analysis and effective policy development to create a sustainable future for every member of society and for societies as a whole. We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to Seanad Eireann on this important issue.

Social Justice Ireland is of course available to the Seanad to discuss this submission in greater detail.

Submission

According to Census data, there were 30,897 Irish Travellers in 2016, an increase of 5.1 per cent from 2011. The long-sought recognition of Travellers as an ethnic minority was achieved in 2016, however, a report published by the ESRI in 2018 found that Travellers continue to face discrimination in education, employment and accommodation, with a widening gap in health over the life course.

A 2018 report by the European Network Against Racism (Ireland) found that incidents of racism against Travellers in 2017 indicate a more concerted and targeted approach, with reports of pubs collectively closing in an area around the time of a Traveller funeral and Travellers being excluded from events having produced paid tickets.

Given the persistent and pervasive discrimination experienced by Travellers, we have responded to this consultation on what may contribute to an increase in dialogue and social inclusion in the first instance, which would then support inclusion of Travellers in the public and political sphere.

Dialogue and Traveller Social Inclusion

Foster inclusion, dialogue and relationships between Travellers and the wider community.

Education levels amongst Travellers remain low, with 62 per cent having primary education or less, 13 per cent having completed second level and only one per cent having a college degree, based on the last Census. Eighty per cent of Travellers reported as being unemployed, compared with 13 per cent for non-Travellers. The ESRI suggest that much of this is directly related to low levels of education. Traveller health is also poor with 19 per cent categorised as having a disability compared to 13.5 per cent of the general population. The suicide rate amongst Traveller men is almost seven times higher than in the general population, and this is an indicator of a serious mental health issues in the Traveller Community. Overall life expectancy for Travellers is low with only 7.5 per cent of Travellers aged over 54 years compared with 23 per cent of the overall population. Housing continues to be problematic for Travellers with Census 2016 figures showing that 39 per cent of Traveller accommodation was overcrowded compared with 6 per cent for all households. In contrast to previous trends, the number of caravans being used increased by 10 per cent between 2016 and 2011. 517 Travellers (1.7 per cent) were recorded as homeless on Census night 2016 compared with 0.1 per cent of the overall population.

Without the basic necessities of living, participation becomes difficult, if not impossible. Inclusion in society, while maintaining a distinct cultural identity, is a major challenge for Travellers, particularly those who wish to continue a nomadic tradition. Property rights are enshrined in the Constitution and seem to supersede most other rights, including participation in ones cultural traditions. Access to public services is largely withheld from those without a fixed address, at least without intervention from the Community and Voluntary sector.

Even when Travellers live in settled communities, inclusion within their immediate and wider communities is often limited. This is particularly evident in both education and access to Traveller specific accommodation.

Traveller Specific Accommodation

According to statistics compiled by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, the number of families in all accommodation increased by almost one third (32 per cent) between 2008 and 2017. The highest rate of increase, at 223 per cent (from 345 to 1,115 families), was in shared accommodation, followed by accommodation provided by Approved Housing Bodies with the assistance of the local authority (116 per cent, from 119 to 317 families), private rented accommodation (57 per cent, from 1,516 to 2,387 families), and those accommodated from their own resources (55 per cent, from 513 to 795 families). During this period, the number of families accommodated on local authority halting sites has decreased by 5 per cent and those accommodated in private houses provided by the local authority has decreased by 2 per cent. In 2017, the highest proportion of families were housed in local authority accommodation (3,701 families) and private rented accommodation (2,387 families).

In their report undertaken on behalf of the Housing Agency, RSM PACEC Ltd, identified overcrowding as a particular issue of concern¹. For families living in caravans and mobile homes, these homes are not intended for use as permanent dwellings, or to accommodate multiple families. The recent harsh weather events had a devastating effect on many low-income households, but particularly on Traveller families living in this type of accommodation. A recent Oireachtas Spotlight report also highlighted the issue of overcrowding in Traveller accommodation². This report cites Traveller organisations as stating that the current housing crisis is exacerbating overcrowding difficulties experienced by Traveller families. Families who have left private accommodation have, they state, ‘relocated to “sites that are already overcrowded, unsafe and uninhabitable” and reference increasing instances of safety and social behavioural problems as a result. Traveller families are also reported to experience greater levels of homelessness.

On the supply side, key challenges facing local authorities in implementing their Traveller Accommodation Programmes (TAPs) were reported as planning issues (the most pervasive planning challenges reported by local authorities and Traveller representatives were objections raised by settled communities and Elected Representatives which tend to delay the planning process); lack of effective assessment of need processes; and lack of effective monitoring and reporting processes. It is these reasons that are used to explain why less than one fifth of funding allocated by central government was drawn down, notwithstanding an increase in funding from €9 million in 2017 to €12 million in 2018. The Spotlight report referred to earlier identifies an ‘implementation gap’ “in that it appears to have resulted in housing outcomes which contradict the policy intention” (p.23). This would support the suggestion in the RSM report that some politicians are “involved in LTACCs [Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee] for the purposes of opposing Traveller accommodation”. In November 2018, representatives from the Expert Review Group on Traveller Accommodation appeared before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing where they gave evidence that over the past decade 67 per cent of the funding allocated for Traveller accommodation was drawn down, with nine local authorities spending nothing in 2018. When asked about sanctions for local authorities who refuse to utilise funding for Traveller accommodation, the Expert Group advised that this would be something it would consider.

¹ <https://www.housingagency.ie/getattachment/Our-Publications/Housing-Management/17-11-21-Independent-Review-of-Funding-for-Traveller-Specific-Accommodation.pdf>

² https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/libraryResearch/2018/2018-10-01_spotlight-traveller-accommodation-the-challenges-of-policy-implementation_en.pdf

The reported conditions experienced by Traveller families, that of increased overcrowding, greater risk of homelessness, and associated health difficulties warrants that this issue be treated as an emergency and that local authorities be compelled to utilise the increased funding available to ensure that Traveller families and their children are supported to live with dignity.

Access to education and accommodation are primary rights denied to many Travellers. This denial inhibits the capacity of Travellers to engage within their communities and to foster inclusive relationships. Targeted educational interventions at all stages of the lifecycle are required to contribute to equality of opportunity and participation. In our Budget Choices 2020 briefing, *Social Justice Ireland* proposes a €2m investment in additional apprenticeship and traineeship places for Traveller students.

Allocations in respect of Traveller specific accommodation need to be fully drawn down and utilised to provide sustainable homes, respectful of Traveller traditions. A set of objectives specifically relating to Traveller accommodation should be drafted and enforced. Local Authorities who do not fully utilise their allowance must account for this, providing objectively justifiable reasons for doing so or facing sanctions for non-compliance.

Address the stigma, prejudice, discrimination, racism, social exclusion and identity erosion experienced by Travellers.

The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy³ was published in 2017. This lists 149 actions across Government under the headings of cultural identity, education, employment, children and youth, health, gender equality, anti-discrimination, accommodation and access to public services.

In July 2018, Minister for Justice and Equality, Charlie Flanagan, provided an update on the Strategy in a Written Response to a Parliamentary Question that, at that point, work had begun on 130 of the 149 actions and further updates predominantly concerning the working of subcommittees. In light of the levels of discrimination faced by members of the Traveller community, more urgent action is needed to protect and support Traveller people, with initiatives such as quotas and inclusion targets to ensure diverse participation is actively sought.

The Department of Education and Skills has engaged with Traveller Representative Groups to inform its discussion on the National Access Plan, however in addition to accessing educational programmes Traveller history and culture must also feature on the national education curriculum at both primary and secondary level.

Education and early intervention to combat discrimination are critical. In their 2015 paper '*What works to reduce prejudice and discrimination? A review of the evidence*'⁴, the Scottish Government considered prejudice reduction interventions, which it states can be categorised into three broad groups:

- Educational strategies
- Short-term diversity training courses
- Media campaigns

³ <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/National%20Traveller%20and%20Roma%20Inclusion%20Strategy,%202017-2021.pdf/Files/National%20Traveller%20and%20Roma%20Inclusion%20Strategy,%202017-2021.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/research-and-analysis/2015/10/works-reduce-prejudice-discrimination-review-evidence/documents/works-reduce-prejudice-discrimination-review-evidence/works-reduce-prejudice-discrimination-review-evidence/govscot%3Adocument/00487370.pdf>

Of the three, educational strategies were found to be the most effective, with teacher engagement of paramount importance. It is unsurprising, given the longer-term nature of educational programmes, that educational strategies tend to be the most effective. Shorter-term interventions, produce shorter-term results and tend to be contextual to the immediate group environment.

Educational strategies aimed at reducing discrimination must be subject to continuous evaluation, of both content and teaching methods, to ensure they remain relevant and effective.

Ensure accurate and fair treatment in the media.

The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland's Code of Fairness, Objectivity and Impartiality in News and Current Affairs has, as two of its primary principles, the principles of 'Objectivity & Impartiality' and 'Accuracy & Responsiveness'. These principles are designed to hold broadcasters to account for the dissemination of media that is unbiased and non-prejudicial, giving a timely right of response to members of the viewing public who believe material to be inaccurate. In addition, the 'Code of Programme Standards' has as one of its principles "Respect for Persons and Groups in Society". This principle states (emphasis added):

*The manner in which persons and groups in society are represented shall be appropriate and justifiable and shall not prejudice respect for human dignity. Robust debate is permissible as is the challenging of assumptions but programme material shall not stigmatise, support or condone discrimination or incite hatred against persons or groups in society in particular on the basis of age, gender, marital status, **membership of the Traveller community**, family status, sexual orientation, disability, race, nationality, ethnicity or religion.*

However, Codes of Conduct, even statutory codes, are too open to interpretation and are not enforced in the courts. The rise in populism has meant public figures bear no consequences for discriminatory references to minority groups, and in fact are more likely to feature prominently in the race for 'clicks' and viewing figures. While discrimination and defamation are against the law, the argument of free speech and 'balance' give permission to incite contempt.

The popularity of social media, while developing online communities, has also provided a platform for 'trolls' to publish hate speech with impunity. The anonymity provided by online platforms emboldens those who may not otherwise air their discriminatory views publicly, but whose presence and support raises the profiles of those who would.

A full review of the ethics codes is required across all media platforms. These codes should be mandatory and enforceable, with a scale of sanctions for breach.

Traveller Participation and Politics

Strengthen the political representation of Travellers locally, nationally and internationally.

Promote and support increased involvement of Travellers in decision making processes within the public sphere.

Increase the inclusion of Travellers within civil structures, governmental agencies and Departments.

Real participation goes beyond voting (representative democracy) to a situation where people and government work in partnership to co-create infrastructure and services, solve problems and work towards the well-being of all in this generation and the generations to come (deliberative democracy). By definition, such a deliberative democracy approach requires a leaving aside of power differentials and making a specific effort to ensure that the voices and views of people who are not traditionally influential are heard and taken into account.

Some of the decision-making structures of our society, and of our world, allow people to be represented in the process. However, almost all of these structures fail to provide genuine participation for most people affected by their decisions, resulting in an apathy towards the political system as a whole. The lack of participation is exacerbated by the primacy given to the market by many analysts, commentators, policy-makers, politicians and media. Most people are not involved in the processes that produce plans and decisions which affect their lives, particularly marginalised groups.

The democratic process would also benefit from the development of a new social contract against exclusion and in favour of a just society. This contract would include a forum for dialogue on civil society issues. Short-term initiatives such as the Presidents Ethics Initiative, the Constitutional Convention and Citizens Assembly are welcome but need to be mainstreamed and reach all sections of Irish Society, including Travellers. The annual National Economic Dialogue is also a useful model to share the perspectives of civil society organisations, Government and the various sectors of society on key budgetary issues. However, a single event is inadequate. *Social Justice Ireland* recommends that such a National Dialogue takes place more frequently, and that the focus is broadened from the economic to include social and environmental issues.

Supporting the Community and Voluntary Sector

The Community and Voluntary Sector provides a range of services and supports to marginalised groups, including Travellers, with the support of funding from the State. One such support is the Community Services Programme (CSP) which enables communities to establish valuable services not otherwise available to them and to create employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups, such as the long term unemployed, Travellers, people with disabilities and so on. According to a 2016 Annual Report of the CSP, 2 per cent of the FTE jobs created were reported as being in respect of Travellers. While the proportion is low, without funding through the Community Services Programme these services, and the jobs they create, would not exist.

The outcomes of the Annual Report on the CSP in respect of Travellers were also mirrored in the report of the ESRI on the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)⁵, which found that while Travellers had among the lowest levels of engagement (at 8%), this was high relative to their representation in the population. The fact that Traveller participation in SICAP programmes was more centred around issue-based groups again demonstrates the desire, and need, for Travellers to be heard on issues that affect them.

Many community funding models are coming under review at present, including the CSP. It is essential that these reviews do not result in any reduction in support to key services, particularly those that support the most marginalised.

Public Participation Networks

In 2014, the Local Government Act was amended to introduce Public Participation Networks (PPNs). The PPN recognises the contribution of volunteer-led organisations to local economic, social and environmental capital. It facilitates input by these organisations into local government through a structure that ensures public participation and representation on decision-making committees within local government. These PPNs have been established in every local authority area in Ireland. By the end of 2018, over 14,000 community and voluntary, social inclusion and environmental organisations

⁵ https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS77_final.pdf

were members of a PPN. Over 880 PPN representatives were elected to over 380 committees on issues such as strategic policy, local community development, joint policing and so on.

Local authorities and PPNs work together collaboratively to support communities and build the capacity of member organisations to engage meaningfully on issues that concern them. PPNs have a significant role in the development and education of their member groups, sharing information, promoting best practice and facilitating networking.

In preparation of this submission, we engaged with a PPN (County Wicklow PPN) that is currently hosted by a Traveller organisation (the Wicklow Travellers Group), to get their view on what has supported Traveller participation in their area and what would enhance this participation in deliberative democracy. Their interventions have included:

- **Building trust and a real relationship** with Travellers, often through key trusted members of the community, for example the development of strong links with the: Primary Health Care Project Co-ordinator and some of the outreach workers; and with the Community development workers.
- **Developing a close working relationship** with their host organisation, Wicklow Travellers Group.
- Adopting a **flexible, accommodating approach** to support and enable involvement.
- **Tailoring our approach to respond to the particular needs/situation** of the community. For example, meetings are organised in a more flexible relaxed manner.
- Maintaining **personal contact** with members of the community, i.e. dropping in and out fairly regularly as opposed to once or twice per year. Having a **real and respectful relationship**.
- Direct, **face to face** invitations to facilitate Travellers to get involved.
- A real commitment to, and focus on, **empowerment** and integration of Travellers, supported by the Wicklow Traveller group.

“In summary, good relationships with key actors in this community are essential to opening the door to engagement.”

Where specific Traveller supports are unavailable, Wicklow PPN have found it difficult to develop relationships and barriers remain. There is also a need to address a gendered bias to participation, where Traveller women are more likely than men to engage.

Local authorities also have a vital role to play in facilitating participation through open consultative processes and active engagement. Building real engagement at local level is a developmental process that requires intensive work and investment. Targeted programmes to promote participation will help, but willingness to meaningfully engage by other local and national stakeholders, particularly Local Authorities, will be critical. Setting achievable objectives and measuring success will also play a key role in encouraging participation and embedding a common purpose.

Conclusion

Social Justice Ireland welcomed Dr. Sindy Joyce’s appointment to the President’s Council of State. We hope that this appointment will raise the profile and quality of debate on issues of importance to Travellers.

However, there remains many areas of public and political life from which Travellers are excluded. This exclusion begins with a lack of acknowledgement for the very existence of a Traveller culture, the lack of access by Traveller children and young people to educational and job opportunities, and the acceptance of anti-Traveller rhetoric as ‘free speech’ in public discourse. The narrative must change

if there is to be any hope of gaining equality of opportunity for Travellers to have meaningful participation.

Public Participation Networks provide a route to local government participation. These networks have the capacity to engage Travellers in meaningful discourse by being involved in representation on a range of policy committees, such as the Joint Policing Committee, the Strategic Policy Committee and the Local and Community Development Committees. However investment is needed to allow these networks to fully engage and deliver on the promise of a deliberative democracy.