



EQUALITY REVIEWS RECOMMEND SYSTEMIC CHANGE ACROSS LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Recent equality reviews by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission have revealed that local authorities continue to provide inadequate Traveller-specific accommodation, and it has made a series of recommendations, requesting all councils to report back with specific actions and to examine how the barriers to the drawdown of State funding can be removed.

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (the ‘Commission’) has published accounts of equality reviews for Ireland’s local authorities, focused on their provision of Traveller-specific accommodation to members of the Traveller Community. The accounts include specific recommendations for action by local authorities.

With strong evidence of a consistent underspend of the Traveller-specific accommodation budget, the Commission initiated these equality reviews in 2019 to gather information from councils and to allow for a systematic review of the issues driving underspend in some local authority areas and, therefore, nationally.

Between 2008 and 2018 of the €168.8m allocated to local authorities for Traveller-

specific accommodation, just €110.6m was drawn down. The Commission has now made a series of recommendations for local authorities and has asked councils to report back with specific actions to be taken, or intended, within specific timeframes. The Commission will then consider what further action, if any, is necessary.

SEEKING SPECIFIC ANSWERS

Sinéad Gibney, Chief Commissioner of the Commission, stated: “The State’s provision of Traveller accommodation has drawn widespread international condemnation including from the UN, the Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU and the Council of Europe.

“The last 12 months alone have been marked by regular and disturbing

reports and testimony on Traveller accommodation, and the Commission’s own legal casework has shown the appalling conditions in which many Traveller families are forced to live.”

She noted that the Commission has requested the city and county councils to examine and equality-proof their system for the provision of culturally appropriate Traveller-specific accommodation, and to examine what the barriers are to the drawdown of State funding and how they can be removed.

“Equality reviews allow us to seek specific answers on issues such as local authorities’ underspend, but equality law can also help bring about practical solutions. The Commission has made recommendations, specific to each



Spring Lane Halting Site in Blackpool, Co. Cork (Photo: Larry Cummins, Irish Examiner)

council's individual equality review, on how they can use an equality-based approach to improve service delivery."

THE THREE KEY ISSUES

- **Underspend in draw-down of allocated funds:** There is evidence that underspend is being driven by both structural issues in how funding is allocated and drawn down, but also by a frequently inadequate deficient process for identifying actual and future housing needs. Traveller specific accommodation budget provides for renovation and refurbishment work to existing accommodation.

Spending may represent renovation or upgrade to existing sites, and not provision of new units of accommodation. Councils highlight difficulties with securing spending approval and reported lack of a multi-annual budget cycle. There are also stated difficulties in agreeing specifics of projects (design of site and type of accommodation) and protracted consultations and discussions with

residents, and also the planning process.

- **Poor information gathering:** There is evidence that the process for assessing the number of Travellers in a given local authority area varies from council to council, and that the process itself can be deficient in capturing accurate information. Councils base current and future needs on social housing applications and the annual estimate of Travellers in their area. There has been no facility for people to identify themselves as members of the Traveller community on the social housing application form. This lack of an ethnic identifier over the period examined has implications for the identification of and inclusion of Travellers within particular housing streams.
- **Accommodation preference:** Travellers' accommodation preference is not adequately transparent, nor does it appear to have been independently verified over

time. There is a concern that some members of the Traveller community experience a lack of Traveller-specific accommodation, overcrowding or poor hygiene conditions, and, therefore, they feel that they have no choice but to apply for social housing. The Commission's analysis of the equality reviews has identified other specific and systemic issues of concern.

CULTURE AND IDENTITY

- **Recognition of Traveller Ethnicity:** There is a lack of evidence of a full appreciation of the practical implications of cultural difference when providing services and engagement with the Traveller community. For example, there is evidence of insufficient appreciation of the cultural significance of horse ownership when delivering Traveller-specific accommodation services.
- **Nomadism:** There is little evidence of assessment of need in relation to Traveller nomadism within and through counties or the nature of such



nomadism currently pursued.

- **Caravan Loan Scheme:** 22 local authorities make no reference to the Caravan Loan Scheme, which facilitates the purchase of caravans for those Travellers who wish to live on halting sites.

accommodation: The lack of suitably sized units for many larger Traveller families is highlighted. Online application systems can result in digital exclusion given poor internet access and low levels of digital literacy.

- **No real analysis of Travellers’ perspective in private rental market:** No local authorities report

MAINSTREAM PROVISION

- **Traveller-specific barriers to accessing**



The accounts of the Local Authority Equality Reviews on Provision of Traveller-Specific Accommodation are published on www.ihrec.ie/our-work/equality-review/

specific steps taken to track Traveller experience of private rented accommodation or to identify and respond to the particular issue of discrimination against Travellers in this sector.

- **Homeless Services:** Many local authorities reference numbers of Traveller families on roadside sites, in overcrowded settings, or availing of emergency accommodation. There is little analysis of the reasons for this growth, the particular experience of homelessness of Travellers, or the implications of Traveller culture and identity for an effective response.
- **Staff Training:** There is little information on the training provided, or the equality and human rights standards set for roles identified as dedicated to work exclusively with Travellers.
- **Travellers with Disabilities:** It is unclear to what extent Travellers are included in local authority housing strategies for people with disabilities.
- **Indigenous Requirements:** 12 local authorities set out ‘indigenous requirements’ for Travellers to be able to avail of social housing supports and/or Traveller-specific accommodation. The Commission has identified the need for these local authorities to review this requirement, to ensure that there is no discrimination when compared to the requirements on the wider community in access to social housing.

While the Commission welcomes the full budget provision for Traveller accommodation was drawn down by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHPLG) in 2020, it urges the Department to build on the flexibilities implemented in relation to Traveller accommodation policy over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Commission also notes the new Government procedures for the drawdown of funds, introduced in 2020 by administrative circular. It claims that it will be necessary to assess over the coming years whether these procedures improve the rate of drawdown for Traveller-specific accommodation.