

A more equitable Ireland for Travellers

Submission by the Citizens Information Board to the Seanad Public Consultation Committee

Introduction

The Citizens Information Board (CIB) welcomes the opportunity to make a Submission to the Seanad Public Consultation Committee on the matter of how to support Travellers' full equality. This Seanad consultation is particularly important in the context of implementing the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) which has as its focus specific and measurable actions for the achievement of full equality for Travellers.

CIB funds and supports the nationwide network of Citizens Information Services (CISs), the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS) and the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) including National Traveller MABS. CIB, through its delivery services, is committed to an equality and social inclusion agenda and to ensuring that services respond to the needs of Travellers and other minority groups.

National Traveller MABS has made a separate submission to the Seanad Committee arising from its work on financial inclusion for Travellers which is particularly relevant to promoting Traveller equality. Their submission contains a series of specific recommendations on affordable culturally appropriate accommodation, energy poverty, access to employment, access to financial services and ethnic equality monitoring, all of which CIB fully endorses.

The focus of the Seanad Committee consultation on Traveller participation and politics and on dialogue and Traveller social inclusion is important and necessary. This needs to be located within a broad contextual framework – recognition of Traveller ethnicity in policy and practice, the uneasy co-existence between Travellers and local communities and, despite many policy reports, legislation and strategies, the significant failure of Irish society to deal with Traveller exclusion.

Factors relevant to implementing a Traveller equality agenda

CIB identifies the following factors as relevant in addressing inequality and social exclusion among the Traveller community and which need to inform the Seanad Committee deliberations.

- 1) Traveller policy ambiguity
- 2) Recognition of Traveller ethnicity and culture across all policy domains
- 3) Need for a composite understanding of Traveller inequality
- 4) Financial inclusion
- 5) Developing an innovative approach to Traveller employment
- 6) Meaningful participation
- 7) Need for a more proactive implementation of NTRIS

Traveller policy ambiguity

Policy ambiguity (broadly understood as arising from a poor or contested understanding of the issue and different perspectives on the means to deal with the issue) has been identified¹ as being at the heart of the Traveller inequality issue in Ireland, specifically as it relates to Traveller accommodation. While for several decades, there has been a clear policy and legal framework on Traveller accommodation and the Government has allocated significant resources for this purpose, this has not been delivered.² For example in 2018, just 52% of the allocation of funds for Traveller accommodation was drawn down³ while up to the end of Quarter 1 in 2019 just over 9% of the annual allocation was drawn down.⁴

The failure by Government to develop mechanisms to hold housing providers to account in respect of their consistent failure in the actual delivery of Traveller-specific accommodation is a clear example of policy ambiguity. As has been widely reported, the Irish Government has recently been urged by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)⁵ to take action against local authorities who fail to spend money allocated for providing accommodation for Travellers. However, such calls have been made repeatedly over the years by Traveller representative organisations without any measureable effect.

The option of removing the responsibility for Traveller accommodation from local authorities and placing it under the remit of a central housing commission has been mooted by the ECRI.⁶ While the reasons for such a proposal are obvious, CIB believes that such a

¹ In a 2018 Oireachtas Library & Research Service Spotlight Report
https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/libraryResearch/2018/2018-10-01_spotlight-traveller-accommodation-the-challenges-of-policy-implementation_en.pdf

² See
https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/2017.07.07_independent_review_of_funding_for_traveller-specific_accommodation.pdf

³ <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2019-05-28a.1435&s=travellers>

⁴ <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2019-05-21a.1687&s=travellers>

⁵ <https://rm.coe.int/fifth-report-on-ireland/168094c575>

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 10

move should be approached with great caution in that it would be in danger of undermining the core principle of local accountability and democracy and could have the effect of exacerbating Traveller policy ambiguity.

Recognition of Traveller ethnicity and culture across all policy domains

The recognition of the ethnicity of Irish Travellers by the Irish Government has been a significant step forward for equality and cultural diversity. It is important from an equality perspective to identify ethnic groups that are accessing mainstream services and those that are not in order to address discrimination and to target policies and resources where they are most needed. CIB has put in place a mechanism to collect ethnicity-related data in respect of users of Citizens Information Services based on the premise that data on ethnicity is essential in order to develop sound policies and to ensure that they are implemented effectively.⁷ While there is a commitment in the NTRIS to collect ethnicity data across all public services, the extent to which this is happening is unclear.⁸

Recommendations

- *The use of an ethnic identifier should without delay become an integral part of all public service delivery to ensure that the use of services by Travellers and other minority groups can be monitored.*
- *All personnel (statutory and NGO) working directly or indirectly with Travellers should have cultural diversity awareness education and training.*

Composite understanding of impact of social inequality

Census 2016 figures highlight both the range of socio-economic areas where Travellers are different to the general population and the multi-faceted nature of current inequalities relating to, for example, educational attainment, employment/unemployment and overcrowded living conditions. However, the overall impact of 'social inequality' on Travellers may not be well reflected across all areas of public policy. Since inequalities in different dimensions tend to move together and reinforce each other, there is a clear need for a stronger focus on the linkages between housing, income, education, and health, as well as on individuals' access to services. For example, the fact that educational attainment among Travellers continues to lag significantly behind that of the general population⁹ and needs to be linked consistently with the other Traveller inequality domains and analysed accordingly.

⁷ http://enarireland.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/ENAR_Factsheet_Social-Inclusion-and-Data_Collection.pdf

⁸ Dáil Éireann Debate, 5 July 2018 <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2018-07-05/25/>

⁹ See Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills deliberations 30th May 2019 <https://www.kildarestreet.com/committees/?id=2019-05-30a.695&s=travellers#g696>

Financial inclusion

Travellers (as well as other population sub-groups) are often excluded from the range of financial services and products and access to credit generally available to consumers. A community banking system which includes the objective of supporting local and regional economic development as well as enhancing financial inclusion for individuals excluded from mainstream banking has significant potential for supporting groups excluded from mainstream financial institutions.¹⁰

Developing an innovative approach to Traveller employment

Low levels of educational attainment often result in low paid and poor quality employment. Traveller educational status has been recorded, repeatedly, as considerably lower than that of society generally and other population sub-groups. While there is an obvious need to address these deficits in the educational infrastructure for Travellers and while work is ongoing in this regard, there is also a need to explore innovative mechanisms for enabling Travellers to engage in and sustain meaningful employment. CIB believes that a social enterprise approach¹¹ has significant potential to match Travellers' skills and experience with the needs of local communities.

Recommendation

The development of a social enterprise approach to creating employment for Travellers should be explored in the context of matching Travellers' skills and experience with the needs of local communities.

Meaningful participation

Effective participation by Travellers has to be based on an acknowledgement by society generally of social, cultural and biographical diversity. This requires the development of diverse and appropriate mechanisms at local level to ensure that individuals and sub-groups within Traveller populations are effectively included. There would appear to be considerable scope to involve Travellers more proactively in local development and social inclusion programmes generally. On the basis that every service that works with Travellers should have specific input from the Traveller community, local statutory agencies and NGOs should develop structures to promote participation.

¹⁰ The matter of a community system is currently under consideration by Government. CIB made a submission to this consultation.

http://www.citizensinformationboard.ie/downloads/social_policy/submissions2019/Community_Banking_Local_Banking_and_Financial_Services_CIB_Subm_April_2019.pdf

¹¹ It is noted that the Government (Department of Rural and Community Development) has published a Draft National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland which has recently been the subject of a public consultation.

Need for a more proactive implementation of NTRIS

In a Written Answer to a Parliamentary Question¹² on 2 April 2019, it was stated that work has begun on 135 of the 149 actions included in the NTRIS and that the Steering Group will continue to monitor progress on these actions and to focus on actions where progress has not yet commenced. This suggests some lack of urgency in implementing the NTRIS. Also, an October 2018 Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the NTRIS¹³ concluded that there has been no tangible improvement in the education, accommodation, employment and health of Travellers and Roma and that the inequality gap between Travellers and Roma and the majority population remains entrenched and that, in the area of accommodation, the situation and experience of Travellers and Roma has worsened.

Conclusion

As a society, we need to develop a better informed understanding of Traveller inequality in all its domains and to develop better integrated responses nationally and locally. This is particularly the case in relation to social attitudes to the provision of culturally appropriate accommodation to Travellers. We need an honest and respectful debate about the respective responsibilities of society, politicians, Government and the Traveller community in ensuring that such accommodation is provided and maintained in a manner that is not divisive. The recent decision¹⁴ by the Dail to establish a *Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community* is welcome. It is to be hoped that this committee will focus on and deal with the matter of Traveller policy ambiguity as discussed in this submission.

While the Government has established various working groups, including more recently, a Traveller Accommodation Expert Review Group to look at the Traveller Accommodation Act 1998 and other relevant legislation and while this is welcome, the issues have been regularly highlighted for many years and have not been adequately addressed. The Seanad Committee could usefully explore the multi-faceted reasons for this failure and advise the Government accordingly. A key consideration is the need for the allocation by Government of resources commensurate with the full implementation of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS).

¹² <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2019-04-02a.627>

¹³ <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3034/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-2-ireland-2018-eprint.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.kildarestreet.com/debates/?id=2019-05-30a.265&s=travellers>