



**Submission
By**

**PAVEE POINT
TRAVELLERS' CENTRE**

TO

THE HOMELESS AGENCY

ON

**THE ACTION PLAN ON HOMELESSNESS
2007-2010**

AUGUST 4TH 2006

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PAVEE POINT

Pavee Point welcomes this opportunity to contribute towards the development of the Action Plan on Homelessness in Dublin 2007-2010

Pavee Point is a voluntary or non-governmental organisation committed to the attainment of human rights for Irish Travellers. The group is comprised of Travellers and members of the majority population working together in partnership to address the needs of Travellers as a minority group experiencing exclusion and marginalisation.

The key values which underpin Pavee Point's work include: human rights, equality, social solidarity, cultural diversity, community development, partnership and recognition that issues facing Travellers are multi-dimensional and so require holistic responses to address them.

Pavee Point works at local, national and international levels, linking the experiences and learning arising within them to inform and develop approaches to address Travellers' socio-economic and cultural exclusion and subsequent non-observance of their human rights.

Traveller Community

Travellers are a distinct minority ethnic group of people indigenous to the island of Ireland. They are distinct from the majority (settled) population in a number of respects including their life style, which historically is a nomadic one, their culture, language and their experience of marginalisation and exclusion from mainstream society.

As noted in the Traveller Health Strategy 2002-2005 "*In the Ireland of today, the Traveller community continues to experience high levels of social exclusion and disadvantage- a situation which requires an urgent, planned response*" (Department of Health & Children 2002, pg 2) This experience of exclusion impacts on many aspects of Travellers' lives including their ability to access services in general and their ability to access culturally appropriate services in particular. In addition, the experience of exclusion renders some members of the community particularly vulnerable to homelessness (see definition below) and responses aimed to address homelessness within the Traveller community needs to take cognisance of their particular needs as a minority ethnic group.

In addition, as Travellers do not form a homogenous group, policy development and services' responses should be premised on an analysis and understanding of the particular experience and impact of homelessness on Traveller women, Traveller youth, Traveller men and Traveller families.

Definition of Homelessness within a Traveller Context

In Pavee Point, we would not consider it useful to define Traveller families as homeless if they were living on a temporary, unofficial or roadside site without facilities. Rather, their situation needs to be defined in a way that reflects the position these families find themselves in and is a useful tool of analysis to respond to the accommodation difficulties that they have.

Therefore, Travellers who are living on the roadside without facilities, in overcrowded conditions or on sites with poor facilities are experiencing chronic accommodation problems, in that they have nowhere suitable to place their trailers, their homes. These Travellers are living in inadequate accommodation, but are not homeless. It is also important to note that for Travellers living in this position their accommodation is inadequate not because they are living in a caravan

(i.e. not because caravans are sometimes defined as “temporary”) but because they have nowhere suitable to put the caravan.

Travellers who do not have a trailer or a house/flat **are** homeless. This would include Travellers who are sleeping rough, living in emergency accommodation including shelters, bed & breakfasts and hostels. Travellers living on a temporary basis with family or friends due to lack of alternative accommodation could also fall into this category.

Homelessness within the Traveller Community

There is a lack of information among Traveller organisations on the experience of Travellers who are homeless within the definition outlined above. As stated in our last submission to the Action Plan on Homelessness 2004-2006, the levels of information and research carried out on Traveller homelessness is non-existent.

However, based on the work of the Traveller Specific Drugs Initiative within Pavee Point and the work of other Traveller organisations, it is clear that the issue of homelessness amongst Travellers is growing, particularly as a result of issues such as drug misuse, violence against women, drug use amongst Travellers who are under 18, Travellers who are coming out of care or residential services, Travellers leaving prison and Travellers with mental health issues.. We cannot provide clear statistics on the level of homelessness within the Traveller community, however a recent needs assessment exercise on Traveller homelessness in the Greater Dublin area by the Traveller Specific Drugs Initiative, (*discussion paper pending*) has revealed that many of the homelessness services in the Greater Dublin area are also unclear as to how many Traveller clients access their services. In terms of the current policy development context of evidence based approaches the question arises as to how can services be planned, developed and evaluated for particular target groups when there is no baseline data about the needs of particular groups?

In 2005, the NACD published a report Drug Use among the Homeless Population in Ireland in which they interviewed 315 homeless people which represented 100% of the sample, of which 4% were Travellers, which is an over representation. This study on homelessness had an ethnic identifier which was used as part of the methodology in collating data, however this was the only figure pertaining to Travellers and no further qualitative information on the experience of Travellers who are homeless was contained in the report.

Much has changed since our last submission, yet some issues remain the same. Where issues remain the same we have included them again in this submission whilst adding up to date information where possible.

Homelessness and the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2002

One area of particular concern is the impact of existing Government policy resulting in homelessness and the risk of homelessness within the Traveller community. The implementation of s.24 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2002 criminalising trespass on both private and public land has resulted in a number of Traveller families being forced into a position of homelessness with the seizure of their caravans while parked on public lands. Evidence from around the country highlights how these families have been forced to sleep in cars and vans following the seizure of their home. The non-implementation of county wide Traveller Accommodation Plans and the lack of provision of Traveller accommodation both in the Dublin region and nationally have created a situation whereby 1200 Traveller families are forced to park illegally, to live without basic facilities and face the risk of having their home taken by the State. Pavee Point recommends that under the action plan on homelessness, all existing and proposed Government Policy be proofed for its impact on homelessness as was outlined in “*Shaping the future- an action plan on homelessness in Dublin 2001 – 2003*”. In order for homeless proofing of all existing and proposed legislation to be successful, clear actions and implementation

strategies for carrying through this work should be named in the Action Plan on Homelessness in Dublin 2007-2010. Pavee Point also calls for a moratorium on evictions under the trespass legislation pending the full implementation of the new Traveller Accommodation Plans on a national basis.

Travellers in the Care of the Health Services Executive

As has been noted in many research publications on factors contributing to homelessness, people who have been care as young people from within the settled and Traveller community leaving the care of Health Services are particularly vulnerable to homelessness. Young people require a range of supports and integrated services to militate against this vulnerability. However, the reality for Travellers trying to access mainstream services is often one of racism and discrimination whereby the cultural needs of Travellers as an ethnic minority group are unrecognised and unmet. Many Travellers taken into the care of the Health Services find themselves isolated from their families and community on leaving Care and require considerable levels of support to enable them to survive the transition. Awareness of the cultural identity of Traveller children and the importance of promoting a positive self identity while in the care of the Health Service Executive is important in equipping the Traveller child to manage the transition from care to the community thereby minimising the risk of homelessness. A number of Traveller Specific initiatives have been undertaken to support Traveller children and families such as Traveller Families Care and the Shared Rearing Service. Care managers, foster families and in particular, health board social workers with responsibility for Traveller children should ensure that family and community links are maintained throughout the child's period in Health Services care.

A recent research project commissioned by the Traveller Health Unit in the Eastern Region: *Caring for Diversity: Report on a Research project to identify the need and potential for culturally appropriate child welfare and protection services for Travellers 2004* noted that in recent Springboard report:

Mc Keown et. al remarked on the proportion of Travellers involved in Springboard projects:

....14% comes from the Travelling Community.....Traveller Families comprise 0.7% of all families with children. In other words, Traveller families are significantly over represented in Springboard projects-by a factor of 20-relative to their size in the total population. (Springboard Report, Kieran McKeown, DOHC, 2001, p 15, 16)

It was also noted in **Caring for Diversity, 2004** that 'Travellers comprise of less than 1% of the total population but about 6% of children in care in the Eastern Region (now the former ERHA), and that 'it seems that Traveller children are about six times as likely to be taken into alternative care when compared to the total population.' This issue is of particular concern, given the fact that many young Travellers (under 18) who are currently homeless drug users have been in the care system and the fact that Traveller children are more likely to be in care.

Racism and Discrimination of Travellers who are homeless

Anecdotally, homelessness services have stated that they have issues placing Travellers in transitional accommodation e.g. private rented accommodation as many landlords don't want Travellers as tenants. Again this issue needs further exploration and investigation on the part of the Homeless Agency. Private landlords who operate such practices should not be given contracts to supply accommodation. Service providers within homeless and mainstream services need to be aware of the particular needs of Travellers who are homeless and should receive training in intercultural and anti-discrimination practices along with the development of policies in this

regard. The difficulties experienced by Travellers trying to access mainstream services because of racism and discrimination has also highlighted, Pavee Point has delivered information sessions on Traveller culture and Traveller issues, however a more comprehensive response is needed in the form of anti racism training and the development of codes of practices and policies in line with current policy contexts i.e. Planning for Diversity: the National Action Plan Against Racism.2005-8. Awareness of the discrimination experienced by Travellers seeking accommodation and employment is particularly important in developing a strategy aimed to address homelessness in Dublin and it is important that staff working with Travellers are made aware of these issues.

Ex-offenders, Homelessness and Mental Health

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Travellers leaving prisons experience great difficulties when seeking accommodation and employment and may experience double discrimination because of their Traveller identity **and** because they are an ex-offender, thus leaving them particularly vulnerable to homelessness. Over the past 3 years, many local Traveller organisations have highlighted the increasing numbers of Travellers in prison with addiction problems, some of whom are homeless on their release from prison. In many cases, probation and welfare are making referrals to Traveller organisations to provide supports for Travellers leaving prison in relation to education, training and supports to come back into the Traveller community.

Research evidence suggests that Travellers are over represented in the prison system and that many Travellers in prison have mental health issue. In a recent article in the Irish Journal of Psychiatric Medicine 2006 "*Psychiatric morbidity among women prisoners newly committed and amongst remanded and sentenced women in the Irish prison system*"¹ the authors findings showed that Traveller women were over represented in both the samples that they looked at and accounted for 10.6% of the committal sample and 6.5% of the cross sectional sample, compared with 0.58% (estimate at the last census) of the general population. In a second article Traveller men accounted for 10.9% of fixed sentence prisoners in the research sample and 6.1% life sentence prisoners identified themselves as members of the Traveller Community². 'In relation to accommodation types for Traveller men 2% of those sampled were living in official or unofficial halting sites or group housing for Travellers, while 78.6% of those who identified themselves as Travellers were in settled housing'. (p57)

The authors also noted that:

'In a survey such as this, the lack of modern surveys of psychiatric morbidity in the Irish population at large, and in groups such as Irish Travellers, urban and rural populations, is a gap in knowledge.' (p59)

The over representation of Travellers in the prison system and significantly the numbers of Travellers with mental health issues is a worrying phenomenon when taken together with the fact that some Travellers who leave prison are homeless. Mental health problems have been noted in research as a contributing factor to homelessness. The low level of services to Travellers experiencing mental health difficulties causes concern to members of the Traveller community. In the Traveller Health Survey carried out by the Northern Area Health Board in 2004 a third of all 365 respondents reported depression in their families. A lack of counselling services in general

¹ Psychiatric morbidity among women prisoners newly committed and amongst remanded and sentenced women in the Irish prison system: Irish Psychiatric Journal, 2006; 23(2), Brenda White, Derbhla Duffy, Katherine Curtin, Sally Linehan, Stephen Monks, Harry G. H Kennedy

² Psychiatric morbidity in the male sentenced Irish prisons population: Irish Psychiatric Medical Journal; 23 (2), Derbhla Duffy, Sally Linehan, Harry G. Kennedy.

and a dearth of culturally appropriate services to Travellers were issues raised in consultation for this submission.

Drugs and Alcohol Misuse

In discussing issues of homelessness with members of the Traveller community, Traveller organisations, Traveller Drug Initiatives and project workers providing services to homeless Travellers, the issue of alcohol and drug misuse is a recurring theme. As more Traveller organisations develop specific responses to drug issues within the Traveller community, the issue of homelessness is an area they are beginning to address. Pavee Point in the process of organising a training event on this issue for Traveller groups who have drug projects, we are also developing a discussion paper on the issue of homelessness and we will be working with local groups to support them address this issue in the context of homelessness alcohol and drug misuse.

Increasingly, young Travellers are becoming more vulnerable to alcohol and drug misuse and are appearing in greater numbers on the streets as noted by agencies such as Focus Ireland, Merchants Quay and Trinity Court, Exchange House Travellers Service, Pavee Point, Traveller Families Care etc. A working group has been in discussion around developing a response to the issue of homelessness, drug misuse and under 18s. Any response developed would have to take account of specific issues for young Travellers.

Difficulties in accessing services, in accessing drug clinics, a lack of night shelter beds and the general lack of support systems and services were identified as problems to be addressed urgently.

The lack of specific policies to deal with drug users within homelessness agencies and the need for training for staff within these agencies on drug related issues, the barring and exclusion of drug users from homelessness services has been noted in the NACD publication Drug Use among the Homeless population in Ireland. Specific policies in relation to homelessness and drugs should reflect the needs of particular target groups such as Travellers.

Gender Based Violence & Homelessness

Coping with domestic violence creates great difficulties for women in general but the experience for Traveller women can have particular consequences when it comes to accessing accommodation or refuge. The experience of both sexism and racism means that Traveller women often face double discrimination when seeking refuge accommodation. The impact of this experience can be very detrimental to the women involved and it is often one of discrimination and rejection. Anecdotal evidence highlights how Traveller women face many dilemmas when attempting to access services often resulting in their being forced to sleep rough for a period of time. The often conflictual relationship between the Guards and the Traveller community creates greater barriers for Traveller women seeking support in this type of situation.

An integrated response which takes into account the voice and experience of Traveller women is required to address this ongoing problem. Liaison with Traveller specific initiatives working in the area of violence against women is important. Women's Refuges should develop and adopt anti-racist codes of practice and all refuge workers should receive in-service training in anti-racism and Interculturalism.

Strategies to Address Homelessness within the Traveller Community

Due to a dearth of research in relation to Homelessness, it is difficult to make detailed recommendations. However, the following may go some way towards addressing the problem of homelessness as it known to relate to Travellers:

The Traveller Specific Drugs Initiative, Pavee Point is in the process of completing a discussion paper on the issue of Traveller Homelessness to support our work on this issue. A needs assessment was carried out to gather information on this issue and we hope to present it to the Homeless Agency as well as Traveller organisations. We will be seeking to meet with the Homeless Agency and some of the main homelessness services to discuss how to respond to the issue of Traveller Homelessness addressing some of the recommendations named below.

- 1) **Homelessness Proofing:** Existing and proposed legislation should be homeless proofed with clear actions and implementation strategies named in the Action Plan on Homelessness in Dublin 2007-2010 Where implementation of existing legislation is seen to result in, or increase risk of homelessness, it should be challenged by the Homeless Agency and other working to address homelessness.
- 2) **Traveller Accommodation:** There should be a moratorium on evictions under the trespass legislation pending the implementation of Traveller Accommodation Plans on a national basis.
- 3) **Equality/Diversity:** Where services to address homelessness are in place, the needs of the Traveller community and other ethnic minorities should be named. This is particularly important in relation to the measures outlined in the Action Plan 2007-2010 where emergency services designed to alleviate the more immediate impacts of homelessness are in operation. Promoting the inclusion of ethnic minorities by naming them and their needs puts an onus on service providers to work with communities such as Travellers in a way that addresses their needs and does not require them to conform to the responses developed with the majority population in mind.
- 4) **Ethnic Monitoring:** In monitoring services for people who are homeless, as outlined in the guiding principles of “*Shaping the future*” there is a need to introduce data collection systems which identify the level of take-up by members of diverse communities. The development of ethnic monitoring and data collection systems is important in developing a knowledge base around the experience of Travellers, Roma and other ethnic minorities and homelessness. Such data can serve as a useful tool for exploring gaps in service provision and barriers to service take-up. Liaison with national Traveller organisations in developing such systems would ensure the location of ethnic monitoring and data collection mechanisms in an equality framework.
- 6) **Travellers in Care:** The recommendations of *Caring for Diversity* should be fully implemented and a multi agency approach Links and supports should be made between social work services, Traveller specific social work services, family support services, the Residential services board and the homeless agency to develop a multi agency response to this issue, particularly in relation to the transition from institutional care to appropriate accommodation, to prevent Traveller homelessness. A review of the recommendations by Caring for Diversity and it’s implications for the homelessness services should be undertaken. (A copy has been sent to the Homelessness Agency, along with this submission.
- 5) **Anti Racism Policies and Practices:** Service provides within homeless and mainstream services need to be aware of the particular needs of Travellers and should receive training in intercultural and anti-discrimination practices. Awareness of the discrimination experienced by Travellers seeking accommodation and employment is particularly important in developing a strategy aimed to address homelessness.

- 6) **Ex Offenders, homelessness and Mental Health:** this is a complex area, but in relation to Travellers, particular attention should be paid to the links between incarceration, mental health issues and homelessness. The stigma attached to mental health issues within the Traveller community and the fact that many Travellers with severe mental health issues are no longer living in the Traveller community and the fact that Travellers fare poorly on the social determinants of health makes this issue a priority.
- 7) **Alcohol and Drug Misuse:** Supports and resources should be allocated to Traveller organisations who are addressing the issue of homelessness and drugs. Again the Homelessness Agency should work with Traveller organisations in reviewing the current situation, policy developments and in planning strategies to develop a holistic response
- 9) **Gender Based Violence:** In developing an integrated response to the issue of violence against women and its possible impact on homelessness, liaison with Traveller specific initiatives working in the area of violence against women is important. Women's Refuges should develop and adopt anti-racist codes of practice and all refuge workers should receive in-service training in anti-racism and interculturalism.
- 10) **Targeted and population approach:** different groups have different needs in relation to homelessness and in developing policies that work and are appropriate for particular target groups e.g. Travellers, under 18s, women, drug users etc

References:

- 1) Department Of Health and Children (2002) "Traveller Health: A National Strategy 2002-05
- 2) Caring for Diversity: Report on a Research project to identify the need and potential for culturally appropriate child welfare and protection services for Travellers 2004, Traveller Health Unit, Eastern Region
- 3) Psychiatric morbidity among women prisoners newly committed and amongst remanded and sentenced women in the Irish prison system: Irish Psychiatric Journal, 2006; 23(2), Brenda White, Derbhla Duffy, Katherine Curtin, Sally Linehan, Stephen Monks, Harry G. H Kennedy
- 4) Psychiatric morbidity in the male sentenced Irish prisons population: Irish Psychiatric Medical Journal, 2006,; 23 (2), Derbhla Duffy, Sally Linehan, Harry G. Kennedy.
- 5) Drug Use among the Homeless Population in Ireland, April 2005, A report for the National Advisory Committee on Drugs, April 2005, Merchants Quay Ireland, Marie Lawless and Caroline Corr
- 8) Homelessness and drug misuse: a continuing challenge for service providers, Drugnet Ireland, Issue 18, Summer 2006, Martin Keane

