

***Irish Traveller Movement, Pavee Point and National Traveller Women’s Forum’s Collective Submission to the Social Worker Review***

*(Submitted via Survey Monkey on the 15th of July 2020)*

**Question 5.**

**Over the last 20 years how effectively do you think the Local authority social worker service has been supporting Travellers regarding their accommodation?**

Very effective

Quite effective

Somewhat effective

Quite ineffective

**Very ineffective**

Don't know

**Question 6**

**what aspects of the social worker service do you think worked well in supporting Travellers regarding their accommodation needs?**

The Irish Traveller Movement (ITM), Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre (PP), and the National Traveller Women’s Forum (NTWF) welcome this review of the role of social workers in relation to the provision of accommodation by local authorities for Travellers.

We acknowledge the role social workers have played as the designated first point of contact for Travellers in many local authorities, and their role in completing housing needs assessments.

There is an acknowledgement that individual good practice has taken place in some cases, but we strongly believe that social work is not the appropriate framework for Travellers to be supported to have their accommodation needs met by local authorities.

**Question 7**

**What Aspects of the Local Authority Social worker service do you think were not worked well in supporting Travellers in regarding their accommodation needs?**

The local authority social workers work within a context of successive failures of Traveller Accommodation Programmes to meet the accommodation needs of Travellers. Despite statutory provisions, including the Traveller Accommodation Act 1998, the situation has by and large not improved for Travellers in Ireland. According to the last Annual Count, 591 families live on unauthorisedsites, many without basic facilities. 927 Traveller families are sharing accommodation. There are over 500 homeless Travellers in Dublin alone. Overcrowding, homelessness and lack of even basic facilities on sites remain prevalent, and individuals and families continue to suffer as a result of policy failures, demonstrating that social workers are part of a structure that has been unsuccessful in supporting Travellers sufficiently regarding their accommodation needs.

The generally accepted rationale and premise for social work is the need for professionals to intervene with individuals and families who are in crisis and have a very real need for an intervention. The Irish Traveller Movement, Pavee Point and National Traveller Women’s Forum feel that social work, as in the provision of other services, should be delivered on the basis of identified need and not on the basis of ethnic identity.

In this regard, social work is fundamentally not suited to be under the auspices of local authorities, but rather should remain solely under the remit of the HSE and Tusla. The view that *all Travellers* need a social worker assigned to them wrongly suggests that all Travellers are in crisis or indeed that Travellers *as a whole* have an inherent set of problems which necessitates social workers to enable them to access a whole host of services with local authorities- services that settled people can access without recourse to a social worker. We strongly believe that there is no justification for Travellers to be assigned to a social worker within a local authority, for the sole purpose of trying to have their accommodation needs met. In the vast majority of cases, social workers play no other role for Travellers within local authorities, beyond assisting with accommodation related issues.

**Unclear Role of Social Workers**

As the duties of housing departments have expanded, the role of social workers within local authorities has evolved in an ad hoc way that has, in some circumstances, led to unclear boundaries between social work and administrative roles. Local authority social workers often fulfil the role as de facto housing liaison officers for Travellers within local authority areas. The social worker assesses different accommodation needs for Travellers and Traveller families and has a role in outlining the accommodation programme for Travellers in the area. In many instances, the role of the local authority social worker is reduced primarily to that of accommodation assessment and provision, a condition that in such cases makes their role as a social worker untenable.

Reports indicate that some local authorities also assign other accommodation assessment duties to these workers. Evidence from the past, which was deeply damaging to Travellers/social worker relations overall, has indicated instances when the annual count details (these carried out by social workers) were used against Travellers on unofficial sites.

The inappropriate use of social workers within local authorities can create confusion for both workers and service users and can also present the possibility of Travellers not gaining access to social workers within other, more relevant mainstream social work services such as Tusla, should they be desired or required.

Policy frameworks, particularly concerning health, over the past number of years have consistently called for the mainstreaming of Traveller services. The current role of social workers within local authorities runs contradictory to these policies.

**Location of Social Workers within the Local Authority and Conflict of Interest**

There is a fundamental flaw in placing a social worker within the auspices of the Local Authority given that one of the roles of the social worker is often seen as a “negotiator” or an advocate for families to various mainstream services, especially in relation to accommodation issues. We feel that social workers, as employees of the local authority, cannot be seen as independent advocates for Travellers in relation to various issues-and specifically in relation to accommodation issues. We feel that it is impossible for social workers to effectively challenge the Local Authorities (their employers) on behalf of Travellers to the level that Travellers would expect from an advocate due to a very real conflict of interest.

In many cases the only point of contact between Travellers and local authorities is with or through the social worker. The perceived need for someone to present or negotiate on behalf of all Traveller families inevitably creates a system of dependence and reliance on social workers and does little to acknowledge and build on existing capacity of Travellers to become empowered to engage directly with service providers. As well as being disempowering for Travellers, it also is a disservice to the profession of social work for social workers to partake in this system, given that empowerment is one of the key identified values within the profession.

Access by Travellers to dedicated housing staff, accommodation and other services should be, as with settled people, without the assistance of social workers. There should be no prior assumption that Travellers must have a social worker advocate or present their issues in advance.

**Social Workers as ‘Gatekeepers’**

In some instances, social workers are tacitly assigned the role of ‘gatekeepers’ to local authority housing services; where all Travellers are referred to a single individual regarding their housing needs. Given the caseload of some local authority social workers, due to the long running failure of local authorities to adequately meet the accommodation needs of Travellers, this can prevent meaningful communication between Travellers and the local authority in relation to their housing needs, and presents difficulties in contacting any relevant local authority officials directly. All local authority staff should be adequately trained and available to Travellers; so that they have equal access to mainstream services.

Even in local authorities with established Traveller specific services, the social worker can assume an authoritative or supervisory role in relation to all issues concerning Travellers, creating a situation where one person’s opinion is held as authority, including on highly sensitive and impactful issues such as deciding whether a Traveller is eligible to be registered as homeless. In contrast, in other local authorities, social workers do not hold enough influence to successfully advocate on behalf of Travellers for their housing needs to be met, when faced with resistance from those in more senior positions within the local authority. Neither situations represent a suitable or constructive role and reduce the capacity of Travellers to one of overdependence.

**Question 8 what do you think are the barriers if any which prevent Local authority social workers working effectively with Travellers to meet their accommodation needs?**

Some of the barriers have already been outlined in the answer above. Some other barriers include;

**Perception of the Role of Social Workers**

Given the primary role of a social worker in most contexts, i.e. work in relation to family/health/child protection issues, this can lead to fear and mistrust among Travellers, making them less likely to wish to engage with Local Authority social workers and impacting on their provision of accommodation, which further strengthens the case for the role to be replaced.

**Cultural Competency and Anti-Racism Training**

A lack of understanding of, and respect for, Traveller culture and accommodation needs is a concerning barrier to ensuring Travellers are supported to avail of culturally appropriate accommodation. This can lead to their real needs and wants not being captured within the Traveller Accommodation Programmes during its assessment of need, which is carried out by Local Authority social workers. The provision of cultural competency and anti-racism training, particularly relating to accommodation, for all local authority housing staff would be a meaningful step towards addressing this issue.

**Traveller Accommodation Underspends and Under-delivery**

The consistent failure Of Local Authorities to develop Traveller specific accommodation and their failure to draw down allocated funds means that social workers and other staff are operating in a challenging context where Travellers’ accommodation needs continue not to be sufficiently met. Given this consistent under-delivery of Traveller-specific accommodation, as highlighted most recently in the 2019 Expert Review on Traveller Accommodation, regardless of the capacity or best intentions of an individual social worker, given the structural and systemic barriers that exist to providing such accommodation social workers have not been successful in advocating for Traveller-specific accommodation or for the housing needs of Travellers be adequately met.

**Systemic Failures and Subsequent Lack of Trust**

Travellers who have been consistently denied their right to adequate, safe and culturally appropriate accommodation by local authorities justifiably no longer have trust in the system, including the work of social workers. Better communication, meaningful consultation and subsequent sufficient provision of accommodation for Travellers would improve relationships between all local authority staff and service users by demonstrating a system that is working effectively to meet urgent and basic needs.

**Question 9**

**How in your view could these barriers be overcome and local authority social worker service be improved?**

ITM, PP and NTWF strongly believe that the social worker service within local authorities should be phased out. The role and responsibilities of social workers working with Travellers with identified needs, to coordinate the delivery of health and/or child protection services, and to support families and empower clients in an ethical manner as underpinned by CORU,should remain solely under the remit of the Health Service Executive and Tusla and not the local authorities.

Local authority staff with a particular remit for Traveller accommodation should be provided as an *additional measure* given the level of unmet accommodation needs within the Traveller community, and not a substitute for access to the same mainstream services as the majority population.

We advocate for the development for a consistent framework and job description for a

**Traveller Accommodation Liaison Officer(s).** The role should take into account the level of accommodation need within the area, and sufficient staff should be resourced to meet that need.

**The Traveller Accommodation Liaison Officer should;**

* be of sufficient seniority within the LA to ensure they are sufficiently effective and influential and have real decision making powers to advance the delivery of accommodation for Travellers
* be the first point-of-contact for Travellers in the Local Authority and help to facilitate access to other relevant officials or services where appropriate rather than acting as a defacto gatekeeper.
* be an advocate on behalf of Travellers (both collectively & individually) within the Local Authority.
* have a clear framework for carrying out housing needs assessments, with a sufficient consultation process, with a clear focus on identifying where Traveller-specific accommodation is the desired accommodation option.
* have a clear remit for outreach to Traveller tenants and housing applicants
* outreach to Traveller families who have identified themselves to be in need of accommodation, but have not yet completed their housing application, and offer consistent and meaningful support for this process
* facilitate meaningful consultation processes with individuals and groups (for example in the context development of halting sites or group housing schemes)
* have a clear communication protocol that is shared with service users and adhered to, to ensure service users can easily access services
* Should be visible and accessible, and their role should be clearly defined and publicised widely
* Local Authority staff in these roles should work to develop and maintain positive and meaningful relationships with local Traveller organisations and individuals and maintain regular communication with both.
* Local authority housing staff should be committed to utilising an interagency approach to problem solving where required and be committed to consultation, participation, social justice and empowerment as key principles within their work.
* They should be familiar with and work in partnership with the existing structures such as the Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee and encourage meaningful Traveller participation in these spaces.

Local Traveller organisations should also be fully resourced to continue their work in supporting Travellers to have their accommodation needs met, given that they are uniquely placed to build relationships and to support Travellers on an individual, but also on a collective level, to advocate for change.

**Employment of Travellers**

We also strongly believe members of the Traveller community should be supported to take up such roles within local authorities in the form of targeted actions in the recruitment process of Traveller Accommodation Liaison Officers.

**Training**

Local authorities should take steps to ensure that all services and supports offered by specific local authority units to Travellers are directly accessible to Travellers and the staff can work sensitively and equitably to facilitate all services users. All staff, at all grades and in all roles, should undertake anti-racism and cultural competency training, as well as public sector duty training at regular intervals, and be committed to a human rights based approach within their respective roles. They should have a sufficient understanding of the historic cultural and political contexts that relate to the provision of Traveller accommodation. The role should incorporate continuous professional development. This training should be coupled with external monitoring and evaluation of their roles.

A Traveller Accommodation Liaison Officer would demonstrate a range of competencies and qualifications, including for example community development and/or human rights. No qualification would be deemed an essential criteria where it would negate the possibility of a Traveller applying for the role who has other equivalent relevant experience and competencies. They would be strongly committed to the principles of human rights, equality, social justice, empowerment and participation as part of their practice.

**Delivery of Traveller Accommodation**

The 32 recommendations of the 2019 Expert Review on Traveller Accommodation should be implemented in full, to ensure that all local authority staff are working within a system and context that is functioning; fully meeting the accommodation needs of Travellers, including the provision of Traveller-specific accommodation, following years of successive failures.

This includes the need for the National Traveller Accommodation Authority to be established, to adequately monitor the success and progress of the work of local authority staff in their brief to provide accommodation for Travellers, and their delivery of their commitments under their respective Traveller Accommodation Programmes. A National Traveller Accommodation Authority would also provide the necessary oversight to ensure the Traveller Accommodation Programmes adequately reflect the need in the local authority area. In the interim, as we await the establishment of the NTAA, we recommend that key performance indicators, with regard to Traveller Accommodation within Local Authorities, are monitored by NOAC as part of their annual reviews.

**Question 10**

**do you think a National Traveller Social framework should be developed**

Yes or**No**

**Question 11**

**If you think a National Traveller Social Framework should be developed, which of the following do you think would be essential elements to incorporate into such a framework. Please tick**

Traveller accommodation policy design and implementation

Increased funding

Specialist social worker training in awareness of culture and socio economic characteristics of the Traveller community

Changes to the current referral processes

Changes to the current framework of community support services

Better Consultation with Travellers

Improvement to interagency initiative and transparency

Others please specify ?

**Question 12 Are you aware of any international good practice in social work for the accommodation needs of nomadic communities or ethnic minorities? If so please provide details here.**

We believe it is important that international best practice is investigated, where nomadic communities are resident, in order that we might learn from them.

**Question 13 please use space to provide any additional comments or suggestions which you feel are relevant.**

**Question 14 would it be ok to contact you should we need clarification on your answers?**

YES.