



Offaly Traveller Movement Homeless Research

Traveller Homelessness: Qualitative Research in County Offaly, finds that homelessness among Travellers is significantly underestimated and is heightened by “widespread discrimination and institutional racism.” Offaly Traveller Movement commissioned the report with funding from St Stephens Green Trust. The independent research consultant Niamh Murphy, who carried out the study, said within county Offaly, 19.1% of homeless presentations to the council are Travellers, yet they account for only 1.3% of the population overall. “This is an alarming figure, given the overall percentage of Travellers in the county,” Ms Murphy said, adding that it’s important to note that local authorities (LAs) will only have data on people who approach them for support. Ms Murphy said Travellers are easily excluded from the statutory definition of homelessness because of the nature of their lives, and also because of how LAs define homelessness. She said the interpretation of homelessness used in Offaly is “very narrow”, and the assessment of housing need is underestimating the issue of homelessness.

Offaly Traveller Movement have long campaigned for the rights of Travellers to access appropriate accommodation and have highlighted the conditions for Travellers especially those living on the unofficial sites where they have no access to running water, refuse collection, electricity or sanitation. Ms Murphy, who carried out the research on behalf of the Offaly Traveller Movement, said health issues are of great concern, including recurring kidney infections in children with no access to toilets, and serious mental health issues.

The research comes at a time when the Irish government have been criticised from European for not provide enough accommodation for Travellers. The European Committee of Social Rights have upheld a complaint that many halting sites are in a poor condition and that the legal safeguards for Travellers threatened with eviction were inadequate. The ECSR is part of the Strasbourg-based Council of Europe, a 47-member body distinct from the EU which promotes human rights and democracy. In 2013, the European Roma Rights Centre lodged a complaint with the committee that Ireland was in breach of the European Social Charter over the standard of accommodation and housing rights for Travellers. The European Social Charter is a legally-binding counterpart to the European Convention on Human Rights. The committee has now

ruled unanimously that there is a violation of Article 16 of the charter on the grounds of the insufficient provision of Traveller accommodation. The committee found a substantial shortfall of halting sites, with only 54 operating out of the 1,000 that were identified back in 1995 as being needed. It found that halting sites were in poor condition, lacked maintenance and were badly located. There were also problems with a lack of water, poor refuse collection and problems with damp, flooding and sewage. The report found that only five local authorities, or 15%, actually provided transient sites. Further more Ireland is in breach of Article 16 over allegations of forced evictions of Travellers. The report found that in recent cases, Travellers facing eviction were not given sufficient information or legal notice, nor were they provided with alternative accommodation, although the committee acknowledged that the Government disputed this. The body will now discuss the findings with a view to adopting a formal resolution against Ireland on the issue.

Here locally Offaly Traveller Movement welcomes the findings of the European Committee of Social Rights which states that there is not enough Traveller specific halting site accommodation provided and that there is insufficient information given to Travellers in relation to evictions. "This report comes as no surprise as it points directly to the situation in Co. Offaly said Emma Gilchreest, OTM's Managing Director. "In Offaly we have official halting sites, but the major concerns we have as a movement are really the unofficial sites which are un-serviced. These sites have no electricity, no running water, no refuse collection and no toilet facilities. The families on these sites would like to live on serviced halting sites to carry on their way of life/nomadic tradition but no new halting sites have been built. We made a submission to the present Traveller Accommodation Plan here in Offaly stating that there was a need for good halting site accommodation for these families, the provision for a new site for Offaly was in the first draft of the plan but was then removed by the local representatives in February 2014. The European report also states that there is lack of transient sites and again Offaly has none with OTM recommending this at every opportunity. Perhaps the Government should consider removing Traveller accommodation from the remit of County Councils as unfortunately our experience here in Offaly is the same throughout the country. Traveller issues will never be politically popular and cannot work under this current political system. Even though some of the local politicians may understand and empathise with the situation for Travellers there is often a conflict of interest as accommodating Travellers can go against their constituents wishes. We are very hopeful that this new report from the European Committee of Social Rights will actually make a difference for our Traveller community in Offaly."

The much awaited and soon to be published OTM research on Traveller homelessness in County Offaly will make a number of recommendations, one of which is that homeless family units be provided as a matter of urgency, as there is currently nowhere in the midlands region that can accommodate a homeless family or a man with children.

“The only homeless units available are for men only, women only, or women and children. The only emergency accommodation that families can utilise are B&Bs. However, the local authority have a limited budget for B&B accommodation and are only supposed to use it in exceptional circumstances for very short periods of time (around three nights),” Niamh Murphy, the researcher notes.

The report will also recommend more joined-up thinking between the Homeless Action Plans and the Traveller Accommodation Programme.