

National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy

A Submission by the Citizens Information Board (July 2015)

Introduction

The Citizens Information Board (CIB) welcomes the opportunity to make a Submission on the new National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy which is being developed by the Department of Justice and Equality. The establishment by the Minister of a Steering Group with broadly based membership to oversee the development and implementation of the Strategy is important.

The Submission is divided into two sections. Section One sets out some contextual factors which are considered centrally relevant in the development of the Strategy. Section Two identifies some priority areas for inclusion in the Strategy.

Role of the Citizens Information Board

The principal functions of the Citizens Information Board (CIB) are to support the provision of and, where appropriate, provide directly to the public, independent information, advice and advocacy services in relation to social services. The CIB is also required to assist and support individuals, particularly those with disabilities, in identifying their needs and options and in accessing their entitlements to social services. Other functions of the Board are to support, promote and develop: (i) greater accessibility, co-ordination and public awareness of social services; (ii) the dissemination of integrated information in relation to such services by statutory bodies and voluntary bodies and (iii) the provision of information on the effectiveness of current social policy and services and to highlight issues which are of concern to users of those services.

The CIB funds and supports the nationwide network of Citizens Information Services (CISs) and the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS). The Board also funds and supports the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) including National Traveller MABS – the latter is particularly relevant to the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy.

2. Contextual Considerations

2.1 Building an Inclusive Society

Social inclusion requires the recognition of all people as full members of society and respect for all of their rights. This involves the removal of barriers that might prevent the enjoyment of these rights by some and the

creation of appropriate supportive and protective environments. Social exclusion does not only mean insufficient income, and/or non-participation in working life or inequality of access to housing, health and social services, but it also relates to those “who are subject to discrimination, segregation, or weakening of traditional forms of social relations” (Commission of the European Communities 1993: 21). The latter point is particularly pertinent to Traveller and Roma communities in Ireland.

The issue of segregation is understandably a significant one for Travellers and one which may be viewed in the same context as discrimination or, indeed, racism. Travellers want to be part of mainstream society while retaining their cultural identity.

An inclusive society does not mean that Travellers and Roma must be assimilated into the dominant culture. As far back as 1990, the then President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, commented:

When we talk about the Travelling Community it’s not just a question of whether they want housing or whether they would prefer serviced halting sites. It’s that they want their culture recognised, they want their dignity respected; they want to be full citizens of this country.¹

It is noted that the previous (2010) Strategy was entitled *Ireland’s National Traveller/ Roma Integration Strategy*² which could be interpreted as not giving due cognisance to the concept of separate ethnic identity and cultural independence.

Travellers, other minority ethnic groups, refugees and asylum seekers have been included in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS). The NAPS framework states that “experience from other countries shows that racialised groups, that is groups that are victims of, vulnerable to or subjected to racism, tend to suffer discrimination, disadvantage, marginalisation and poverty”.³

There are a number of dimensions of social inclusion which are particularly applicable to Traveller and Roma communities⁴ and need to be included in the revised National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy:

- Access to public goods, services and public spaces on an equal basis with others
- Experiencing valued social roles and being trusted to perform these
- Belonging to a local community
- Income supports commensurate with need
- Access to adequate and appropriate housing

¹Address at Pavee Point Dublin in December 1990.

²http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma_ireland_strategy_en.pdf

³ Building an Intercultural Society, Equality Authority, 2004.

⁴ Council of Europe (2012), Human Rights of Roma and Travellers in Europe

- The right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and access to health services accordingly
- The right to education (at all levels)
- The right to employment, including training and job activation measures
- Participation of in public life and decision-making processes
- Protection of ethnic and cultural diversity

2.2 Poverty and Deprivation among the Travelling Community

Irish Travellers are one of the most marginalized and excluded groups in Irish society, facing an 84% unemployment rate.⁵ The All Ireland Health Study (2010)⁶ showed that life expectancy for Traveller men is 15 years less for Traveller men and 12 years less for Traveller women than those in the general population. According to the All-Ireland Traveller Health Study (2010), over 2,700 Travellers do not have access to running water. Census 2011 showed that 55% of Travellers leave school before the age of 15 and only 1% of Travellers attain a third level qualification.

The link between health and housing conditions is widely acknowledged and housing rights encompass amenities essential for healthy living. It is accepted that everyone has the right to a standard of housing adequate for health and well-being. “Everyone has the right to access of safe drinking water, electricity and lighting, heating (if necessary), sanitation and washing facilities, cooking facilities, food storage, ventilation and drainage’ and the removal of garbage”.⁷

2.3 Housing and the Traveller and Roma Communities

It is generally acknowledged that accommodation factors and related supports impact positively or negatively on people’s quality of life. The right to adequate accommodation is an integral part of social and economic rights. This right assumes a particular significance for people who cannot find accommodation either at all or accommodation that meets their specific housing needs.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,⁸ commenting on the concept of ‘cultural adequacy’, states that “the way housing is constructed, the building materials used and policies supporting these must appropriately enable the expression of cultural identity and diversity of housing”. This applies in particular to Traveller accommodation policies.

National Traveller MABS has highlighted the fact that a number of local authorities have discontinued a formally established caravan loan initiative introduced in 2000 by the Department of Environment and Local

⁵ <http://www.paveepoint.ie/irish-travellers-and-roma/>

⁶ <http://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/AITHS-Summary-of-Findings.pdf>

⁷ Article 7 of the Draft International Convention on Human Rights 1994, prepared by Mr Rajinder Sachar, UN Special Rapporteur UN Doc E/CN.4/Sub2/1994/20. Section IX

⁸ U.N. Doc. E/1992/23, Section 8g,

Government primarily due to defaults and lack of funding. This has pushed many Travellers back into standard social housing or private rented accommodation which has proven negative consequences. Some of these include isolation from the wider family network, prejudices from neighbours and can lead to high levels of depression. Additionally, it is extremely difficult for people on social welfare and Rent Supplement to access private rented accommodation as landlords can often refuse someone on rent supplement.⁹

National Traveller MABS has called on the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government to reinstate caravan loans for Travellers in all local authorities.

2.4 Challenges Facing the Roma Community

A 2012 Council of Europe Report referred to the particular challenges affecting the inclusion of Roma in the labour market and their exclusion from decent work. The following are likely to be relevant in the Irish context:

- Despite positive efforts in some countries, levels of unemployment among Roma and Travellers are invariably at levels significantly higher than among non-Roma;
- Endemic discrimination combined with under-education appears to nullify the effect of emerging employment policies targeting Roma and Travellers;
- In a number of countries, Roma and Travellers are denied employment on discriminatory grounds – due to their ethnicity or the perception of their affiliation with Roma or Traveller communities or groups;
- Statelessness and gaps in the personal documentation of Roma not having a formal administrative existence, e.g., birth certificates, identity cards, passports and other documents, impacts on their ability to get regular employment.

2.5 Additional needs of the Roma Community

Since many people in the Roma community are likely to be migrants to Ireland, aspects of the migration integration strategy are relevant to them in a way that is not the case for Irish Travellers.

Of particular relevance in this regard are:

- The multi-faceted needs of those who are undocumented
- Optimising the wealth of skills and experience of migrants that has hitherto remained untapped due to language, cultural and attitudinal

⁹ CIB welcomes the intention to amend equality legislation to prohibit discrimination in this area.

barriers

- Promoting the full participation of migrants in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the country
- English language training
- Interpretation and translation facilities
- Targeted funding arrangements for ethnic minorities

2.6 Participation in Decision-making

Participation in decision-making is an essential dimension of social inclusion and, therefore, full and meaningful consultation with Travellers and Roma is key to a socially inclusive model of responding to the social welfare, health, housing and educational needs of the Traveller and Roma communities. It is generally accepted that consultation should go beyond individual comment and should generate forums in which the relevant parties participate and where there is a collective sense of what is appropriate and needs to be agreed upon.

Travellers and Roma clearly and understandably want to have a voice. They want mechanisms put in place that will genuinely enable that voice to be heard so that they can partake as full and equal citizens and contribute to the shaping of decisions that directly affect their lives. In particular, Travellers want to be actively involved in decisions relating to their living space and environment.¹⁰ For example, in relation to housing, it has been argued consultation with Travellers should take place from, 'the initiation of the project through to the implementation stage.'¹¹

2.7 Data on Ethnicity

There is very little accurate and reliable data available about Roma in Ireland because the data collected is based on nationality and not ethnicity. The CIB is in the process of putting in place a mechanism to collect ethnicity-related data across our service delivery partners. The introduction of such a mechanism is based on the following considerations¹² :

- Collecting "ethnic" data for the purpose of combating racism and xenophobia is essential in order to develop sound policies and to

¹⁰ Government Guidelines positively support Travellers being involved in the designing of Traveller specific accommodation.

¹¹ See Guidelines for Group Housing for Travellers.2.1.

<http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Housing/FileDownload,18187,en.pdf>

¹² See, for example, Patrick Simon, (2007) *"Ethnic" statistics and data protection in the Council of Europe countries*; Des Hogan (2014) *Response to papers on data collection on ethnic minorities as tools to combat discrimination*.

ensure that they are implemented effectively;¹³

- There is a need to ensure that there is a transparent system to collect adequate data on persons from minority groups in order to address direct or indirect discrimination

CIB is acutely aware that any system of data collection should be transparent and voluntary, and not overly intrusive or disproportionate to the aim pursued and that data collection in all cases is carried out with due respect for the principles of confidentiality, informed consent and the voluntary self-identification of persons as belonging to a particular group.

¹³ http://enarireland.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/ENAR_Factsheet_Social-Inclusion-and-Data_Collection.pdf

Priority Themes to be included in a revised National Inclusion Strategy

Based on the above considerations, six priority themes for consideration in developing the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy are identified.

Priority 1: Building community solidarity

There is a need to strengthen solidarity within civil society generally in order to better deal with issues of exclusion, racism and discrimination. This needs to be combined with facilitating the expression of cultural identity and diversity of housing requirements.

Priority 2: Effective Participation by Travellers and Roma

The proactive involvement of the Traveller and Roma communities in implementing the strategy is fundamental and should be a strategic priority. How to achieve meaningful participation should be a key consideration. Provision should be made for enhancing participation at both local and national levels.

Priority 3: Building a stronger intercultural dimension into key policy instruments

The Traveller and Roma communities want their cultural diversity to be respected and accommodated across all social policies – housing, health, education. This can only happen within a framework where Travellers and Roma are equal partners in all processes of negotiation and consultation

Priority 4: Accommodation

The right to adequate accommodation is an integral part of social and economic rights. The issue of segregation is understandably a significant one for Travellers and one which is clearly viewed in the same context as discrimination or, indeed, racism. Travellers want to be part of mainstream society while retaining their cultural identity. Traveller accommodation policies play a central role in either promoting or eradicating a way of life that has been in existence for generations.

Priority 5: Integrating Travellers and Roma into the Workforce

There is much work to be done to integrate Travellers and Roma into the Irish work force. In particular, for the younger generation of Travellers this means having more targeted training and pathways to work options geared towards their specific cultural values and aspirations. It also means addressing the current barriers both attitudinal and cultural.

Priority 6: Financial Inclusion

It is widely recognized that access to financial services is a key component in social inclusion¹⁴ and that some people, e.g., welfare dependent families

¹⁴ Combat Poverty Agency (2006), *Financial Exclusion in Ireland*.

and /or indebted households, may experience difficulties in securing access to financial services, including basic banking services. People who find themselves excluded from the range of financial services and products generally available to consumers are likely to be further marginalized in the current economic climate.

The challenge faced by the majority of citizens/consumers in understanding the complex set of legislative and regulatory provisions and related protections relating to financial services and products may be more complex for people who do not use conventional banking. MABS has long identified a need for a basic bank account and access to affordable credit.