

**TRAVELLER  
ACCOMMODATION  
PROGRAMME  
COUNTY  
WESTMEATH  
  
2009-2013**

*Adopted by the Members of Westmeath County Council on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2009*

March 2009.

## CONTENTS

Introduction	3/4
▪Main Provisions of the Act	5/6
▪Assessment of Travellers' Accommodation Needs	6
▪Unauthorised Encampments	7
▪Implementing Authorities	8
▪Assistance to approved Voluntary Bodies	8
▪Management and maintenance of the Accommodation	8/9
▪Procedures for dealing with issues/difficulties	9
▪Survey of Travelling families in County Westmeath	9
▪Present Accommodation	10
▪Future Accommodation Needs	10/11
▪5-year Programme	11/12
▪Type and Location of Accommodation	12
▪Provisions/Objectives	13
▪APPENDIX 1	14/15/16/17
▪APPENDIX 2	18
▪APPENDIX 3	19

## **Introduction**

The Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998 came into effect on the 10<sup>th</sup> September 2008.

The primary purpose of the Act is to provide a comprehensive legislative framework within which housing authorities in consultation with Travellers and the general public must meet the accommodation needs of Travellers normally resident within their administrative areas, within a reasonable period of time, to promote social inclusion and equality and to counter discrimination. The Act ensures a comprehensive and planned response by all housing authorities in the state towards meeting the accommodation needs of Travellers, underpinned by a comprehensive and thorough consultative process with all interests concerned.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> May 2000 a 5-year programme to meet the existing and projected accommodation needs of Travellers in the County, was adopted. In addition a Local Consultative Committee was appointed to advise the Council on the matter of Traveller accommodation.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> January 2005 a further 4-year programme was adopted to cover the period 2005-2008.

During the life of both programmes all objectives and targets were exceeded including the provision of accommodation, the upgrading of Blackberry Lane Halting Site, Athlone and Michaels Park Halting Site, Mullingar, the recruitment of a Housing Welfare Officer and a Community Worker for Travellers. Two play areas were also provided in the Blackberry Lane site.

Westmeath County Council adopted a further 5-year programme on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2009 for 2009-2013.

The Council at present accommodates some Travellers in group housing; halting sites and standard housing, this would include rented Council accommodation and a small number under the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS).

This document outlines this Council's proposal to meet the accommodation needs of the Traveller families in this county and the strategy it will adopt to achieve these proposals.

The Task Force on the Travelling Community in its report of July 1995, referred to the Travelling People Review Body (in its 1983 report) definition of Travellers, as follows:

Travellers "are an identifiable group of people, identified both by themselves and by other members of the community (referred to for convenience as the "settled community") as people with their own distinctive lifestyle, traditionally of a nomadic nature but not now habitual wanderers. They have needs, wants and values which are different in some ways from those of the settled community."

Acknowledging the differences referred to, the Council in the preparation of this Traveller accommodation programme recognises that some Travellers' housing needs cannot be satisfied through the provision of standard housing. Accordingly, provision of other suitable types of accommodation measures will form a part of this programme in response to the specific needs of these Travellers.

## **MAIN PROVISIONS OF THE ACT**

Circular Letter TAU 7/08 issued by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2008, required housing authorities to prepare for adoption and implementation a third accommodation programme to cover the period 1<sup>st</sup> January 2009 to the 31<sup>st</sup> December 2013. The Minister has directed that the latest date for adoption of accommodation programmes is 30<sup>th</sup> April 2009.

- Provide that the adoption of the programme will be a reserved function but, in the event that the members fail to adopt a programme within the appointed time, the Manager will be required to adopt the programme, by order, within one calendar month;
- Provide for a public notification and consultation process in respect of the preparation of Traveller accommodation programmes;
- Requires housing authorities to take reasonable steps to secure the implementation of Traveller accommodation programmes;
- Provide for the establishment of the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee;
- Provide for the establishment of a Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee to facilitate consultation with Travellers;
- Extend statutory backing for the provision of financial support to housing authorities for the provision and management of Traveller accommodation;
- Extend the range of options available to Travellers to acquire appropriate accommodation by introducing a statutory framework for housing authority loans for caravans or sites for caravans;
- Enhance the powers available to housing authorities to control unauthorised temporary dwellings;

- Amend the Local Government (Planning & Development) Acts to ensure that county and urban development plans specifically include objectives concerning the provision of Traveller accommodation;
- Provide that annual reports prepared by County Councils and County Borough Corporations include details of the steps taken to secure implementation of Traveller accommodation programmes and information concerning the proceedings of the relevant Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee;
- Extend to halting sites the powers available to Local Authorities under the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1997, relating to anti-social behaviour and estate management.

### **ASSESSMENT OF NEED**

In accordance with Section 9 of the Housing Act 1988 as amended, the Council carried out an assessment of housing needs as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008 and this included an assessment of the needs of the Travelling community in the county.

The Council carried out a further in-depth survey on all Traveller accommodation needs in September and October 2004 to facilitate the preparation of the 4-year programme.

Annual censuses of Travellers were undertaken in 2005, 2006 and 2007. The census for 2008 is currently being completed.

From time to time, the Traveller population in the county increases in number through the arrival for short periods of Travellers from other parts of the country. These Travellers tend to move about the country and would stop in Westmeath once or twice a year. They generally park on the roadside, on public areas or on the transient halting sites in Athlone and Mullingar.

It is the experience of the Council that when Travellers apply for accommodation they generally reside in:

- Halting sites
- Caravan on family site
- Private rented accommodation
- Family home.

### **UNAUTHORISED ENCAMPMENTS**

Roadside parking is not common in County Westmeath. Where Travellers take up residence on unofficial sites in close proximity to accommodation provided for Traveller families by local authorities in County Westmeath, appropriate action will be taken by the local authorities in accordance with the provision of the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998.

The Council will discourage the establishment of unauthorised encampments and to this end, will use the measures set out in legislation, as appropriate.

The main legislation in this regard is as follows:

- Housing Act 1992**
- Roads Act 1993**
- Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998**
- Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2002.**

It is intended that through the provision of serviced transient site accommodation, the Housing authorities will be in a position to eliminate the practice of unauthorised camping on the roadside.

## **IMPLEMENTING AUTHORITIES**

Westmeath County Council will have overall responsibility for the implementation of the programme in its functional area which will include the areas of Athlone Town Council and Mullingar Town Commissioners.

The Town Council of Athlone will as a housing authority continue to have responsibility for the provision of housing accommodation within its respective area. It will be required to have regard to the Traveller Accommodation Programme.

## **ASSISTANCE TO APPROVED VOLUNTARY BODIES**

The provision of accommodation by voluntary bodies has traditionally been heavily dependent on assistance from the state or local authorities by the way of site provision and capital funding. Applications by these bodies to the Council to provide accommodation will be expected to have regard to the needs of Traveller families, in accordance with the accommodation programme. Accommodation provided in accordance with the Loan and Subsidy Scheme is considered to be particularly suitable in this regard.

## **MANAGEMENT & MAINTENANCE OF THE ACCOMMODATION**

It is essential that adequate arrangements be put in place for the management and maintenance of Traveller accommodation. Caretakers have been provided for permanent halting sites/transient halting sites.

The housing authorities will support and promote the involvement by Travellers in estate management of their halting sites. A management committee has been formed in Blackberry lane, Athlone, to maximise the use of the community centre as a resource for the residents.

The committee is made up of representatives of the Council, Community groups and the residents of Blackberry Lane. Funding has also been received for estate management training of the residents.

The housing authorities will also encourage the involvement of Travellers in estate management initiatives where Travellers are residing in local authority housing schemes.

In the interest of residents and in order to ensure a proper standard of management and maintenance of Traveller specific accommodation, the housing authorities will take appropriate measures in cases involving anti-social behaviour in accordance with the Council's adopted policy.

## **PROCEDURES FOR DEALING WITH ISSUES/DIFFICULTIES**

Council staff involved in the provision of Traveller accommodation will be available to provide assistance in the event of any difficulties arising with regard to the accommodation programme.

The Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee will also be available to meet representatives of local groups to discuss difficulties, which may arise, in relation to the provision of accommodation for Travellers.

## **SURVEY OF TRAVELLING FAMILIES IN COUNTY WESTMEATH**

**SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER 2008**

A survey of all identified Traveller families was carried out in September and October 2008. This survey was based on data already available to Westmeath County Council and Athlone Town Council based on previous surveys and regular contact with Travellers and Traveller representatives.

This survey not only identified future accommodation needs but also showed the varied present accommodation that Traveller families occupy.

**A total of 256 families were identified as living in County Westmeath.**

### **PRESENT ACCOMMODATION**

Table 1

Type of Accommodation	Number of families
Permanent Halting Site Bay	17
Group Housing	6
Transient	14
Standard Local Authority Housing	86
Private Rented	25
House Acquired by Travellers without Local Authority assistance	80
Tenant Purchase	28
Side of Road	0
Total	256

The table below summarises the position with regard to Travellers who will reach the age of 18 during the life of the proposed programme.

**Table 2**

Male	14	Female	11	Total	25
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### **FUTURE ACCOMMODATION NEEDS 2009 – 2013**

There is a tradition in the travelling community to inter-marry thereby reducing the number of separate family units that may form over the 5-year period.

Assuming 30% family formation over the 5-year period by those identified in Table 3 this will result in a requirement for 7 units.

The survey further identified a total of 38 established family units who are in need of accommodation (see below) giving a total of 45 accommodation units needed during the life of the proposed programme.

The total of 38 are those already on the waiting list, those in private rented accommodation, living in mobile homes in back gardens and on transient sites. Based on previous trends approximately 25% of Travellers will source alternative accommodation with the assistance of the Local Authority including private rented and their own means reducing the level of identified demand to 28 units of accommodation.

In total a requirement for provision of 35 units of accommodation has been identified.

### **5-YEAR PROGRAMME**

It is considered that a total of 35 units of accommodation should be provided over the 5-year programme to cater for the existing demand and projected demand and to accommodate the remainder in casual vacancies that arise in the two halting sites in the country.

Over the period of the programme the following annual targets are proposed:

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Units of accommodation	7	8	6	7	7

Annual targets for Traveller Accommodation Programme 2009-2013 by accommodation type:

<b>Type</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
Standard Local Authority Housing	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>
Traveller Group Housing	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
Halting Site Bays	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
Transient Bays	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
Halting Site Refurbishments	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
Group Housing Refurbishments	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
Rental Accommodation Scheme	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
Part V	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

## **TYPE AND LOCATION OF ACCOMMODATION**

The majority of the travelling community in Westmeath reside in the two largest towns in the county, Athlone and Mullingar. In so far as practicable their stated accommodation and area preferences will be provided for over the 5-year programme.

To meet the accommodation needs of Travellers, the following options will be considered and provided where required and deemed suitable:

- standard local authority housing,
- group housing schemes,
- permanent halting sites,
- transient halting sites,
- house purchase loans,
- voluntary housing schemes,
- private rented accommodation,
- RAS,
- rural local authority housing.

## PROVISIONS/OBJECTIVES

In order to meet the identified demand the following measures are proposed:

- Consideration will be given to the construction of bedrooms to the permanent bays in Blackberry Lane Halting Site, Athlone. Westmeath County Council is in discussions with the Department with a view to a pilot scheme in Blackberry Lane. A similar request has been received from residents of Michael's Park Halting Site, Mullingar. Consideration will be given to this request following evaluation of the proposed pilot scheme in Athlone.
- The provision of a transient site will be examined and analysed in the context of the overall requirement for transient provision in the Athlone/South Roscommon area.
- Allocation of houses in local authority schemes in Mullingar and Athlone.
- Allocation of houses in local authority schemes in other towns and villages where expressed preferences are indicated.
- Allocation of accommodation secured under Part V of the Planning & Development Act 2000 as amended.
- Purchase of rural houses to suit individual applicants may only be considered in exceptional circumstances and where all other options have been exhausted.
- Any approved Voluntary Housing bodies providing houses during the period of the programme will be expected to have regard to the need of Traveller families in accordance with the terms of the programme.
- Provision of accommodation under the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS).
- The Council will make available appropriate loans and grants to Travellers to allow them purchase or provide their own accommodation subject to their meeting the appropriate criteria in relation to the allocation of loans and grants.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Irish Traveller Movement Summary of Submission to Traveller Accommodation Programme**

#### **Background**

Based on the learning and experience of the previous programmes the ITM has identified a number of key issues and recommendations, which we hope will guide you in the preparation and implementation of your TAP.

At a national level the National Accommodation Officer provides a significant resource to TAPs.

At local level Traveller organisations also make arrangements to support and resource Traveller participation in the drawing up and implementation of TAPs.

#### **Consultation at Local Level**

The NTACC has just completed guidelines on consultation mechanisms at a local level. The ITM strongly recommends that these guidelines are followed in regard to the preparation of TAPs.

#### **Operation and membership of Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committees (LTACCS)**

The following recommendations are based on the NTACC's guidelines published in 2004 following a review of LTACCSs.

Nomination procedures need to be inclusive and transparent. It is important that Traveller representatives are in a position to represent the overall population in each area. Where local Traveller organisations exist these groups should nominate their own representatives. Where they do not exist the National Traveller organisations should be of assistance.

LTACCs are to advise on:

- The provision and management of accommodation for Travellers.
- The preparation and implementation of any accommodation programme.
- The management of accommodation for Travellers.
- LTACCs should not be used to discuss individual cases
- LTACCs should meet a minimum of 4 times a year.
- As stated by the NTACC the appropriate Director of Services should report in person to every LTACC meeting.
- Overall objective of LTACC is to ensure that TAPs are implemented in full. They should measure progress annually.
- Process as well as delivery should be monitored by the LTACC.
- The LTACC should produce an annual report.
- The LTACC should formally report to the Local Authority and the Director of Services twice a year. The Manager and the Director of Services should be formally asked to meet with the LTACC once a year on completion of its Annual report.
- The successful operation of LTACCs is crucial to the success of TAPs.
- The position of chairperson should be reviewed at the end of the second year of appointment.
- The chair should be rotated amongst members.
- The position of chair and vice chair should not be held by two people from the same organisation.

## **Policy Statement**

The ITM recommends that the statement of policy should be devised by the LTACC. This statement should set out equality commitments to Travellers. This would ensure that the TAP was clearly based on respect for Traveller culture and a commitment to provide accommodation to Travellers based on their specific needs.

### **■Statement of Strategy**

■The third TAP should be bound by SMART principles.

It has been the experience of the ITM based on the previous two TAPs that a number of issues are emerging, such as land stock, land acquisition, CPOs and transfers and maintenance of properties and land between urban and rural functional areas.

### **Assessment of needs**

The ITM recommends that local Traveller organisations should be involved in the carrying out of assessment of needs.

### **Allocation of Accommodation**

A fair and transparent allocation of accommodation is a key feature of the Traveller Accommodation Programmes. The ITM recommends that all local authorities adopt and implement a scheme of letting priorities based on a point system.

The ITM questions the legality of quota systems in Traveller Accommodation Programmes.

### **Provision of accommodation for Nomadic Families**

The ITM submits that transient site provision is an integral part of a local authority's accommodation plan.

Transient provision should not be used as a temporary accommodation option for families normally resident in the local authority area and who are waiting permanent accommodation.

The use of a transient site should incur a flat fee per caravan. There should be a maximum stay of 8 weeks.

### **Identification of spaces for emergency use**

Sometimes Travellers are forced to leave accommodation unexpectedly due to violence or intimidation by others. ITM recommends that the TAP should contain a policy statement in respect of how the local authority will address this type of situation.

### **Tenant Participation**

The degree to which Travellers are involved in the development of accommodation options and supported to play a full and meaningful role in the management of such is central to building and sustaining a successful Traveller Accommodation Strategy.

### **Section 24 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2001**

It is the view of the DOEHLG and NTACC that local authorities should not direct the Gardai to use this legislation as far as practicable. The ITM concurs with this view.

## **Appendix 2**

### ***Submission from An Garda Siochana, Athlone.***

Traveller needs and issues occupy a large amount of Garda time and attention.

In respect of Athlone there is a problem with access and egress in respect to the Hard Stand. The layout does not lend itself to good policing.

The temporary bays are taken up by families that appear to be permanently residing there. This can lead to problems when Travellers are found to have parked or pulled into a public area or along the side of roads.

A second halting site should be available for use as a temporary site which all Traveller persons arriving in Athlone and its surrounding areas should be obliged to avail of. If it is designed and managed properly it can be policed professionally. The legal obligation on them to use this site would assist Gardai and Councils should the need occur.

It should also be noted that Travelling families have been moved into estates via Health Board accommodation without consultation and the effects of this has been very unsuccessful in some cases. Since Council and Gardai have engaged in regular dialogue, a lot of instances of this nature have been averted and issues have been resolved with early intervention. I believe inter agency dialogue should be fully endorsed and its merits should be extolled to all agencies in future plans.

**Aidan Glacken**  
**Superintendent.**

### **Appendix 3**

A copy of the Draft Traveller Accommodation Plan was sent to the following organisations:

Meath County Council

Cavan County Council

Offaly County Council

Longford County Council

Roscommon County Council

An Garda Siochana, Athlone

An Garda Siochana, Mullingar

Harmony CDP, Athlone

WEP, Mullingar

HSE, Mullingar