



# No End in Site: 2024 Update

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An investigation into the living conditions for children on a Local Authority run halting site

October 2024



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for children



# Introduction

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In May 2021 the Ombudsman for Children’s Office (OCO) published No End in Site, an investigation into the living conditions on a Local Authority run halting site, accommodating 66 children and their families. Three years later, the situation has improved significantly and the future looks more hopeful for the children and families living on this site. The response from all parties to the OCO recommendations arising from our investigation could act as a blueprint for other local authority areas to promote equal access to safe, secure and quality accommodation for Traveller children and their families.

# Background

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In 2018 a complaint was made to the OCO by a Traveller Advocacy Group (TAG). Subsequently 11 families at the site came forward to make individual and shared complaints about a range of issues. These included:

- persistent problems with rodent infestation
- inadequate sanitation
- extreme overcrowding
- illegal dumping in and around the site
- inconsistent and inadequate waste disposal and heating systems
- unsafe electrical works
- a high rate of childhood illness caused by living conditions
- safety concerns about the access routes to the site
- a lack of safe play areas for children
- housing applications not being progressed.

As part of our investigation, the OCO visited the site where we observed very basic conditions that had been in place since the site was first established in 1989. Approximately 140 people were using toilets and washing facilities originally designed for 40 people. The residents and their advocates told us this had led to stress, tension and, at times, conflict.

## Adverse effect on children

Importantly, we also met with 17 children living on the site who told us about the difficulties they encountered every day due to their living conditions and how they felt different to their peers as a result. This was central to our investigation, with some of the children telling us:

*“it takes two or three hours to heat up a bath and we’re all using the one water”*  
— (girl 13)

*“walking up to school you see all the rats” .....*

*“they would be running up and down the walls of the trailer”* — (girl 12)

*“people ask why I’m dirty, but I’d be ashamed to say. I don’t want to say it was from walking out of the site”* — (girl 14)

*“we only play in puddles”* — (boy 7)

*“when you put your hands out of the bed in the mornings, the blankets are all wet” — (girl 16)*

*“sometimes the electric goes off and then it’s black — (girl 7)*

## **Investigation Outcome**

At the end of our Investigation the OCO made 10 recommendations, all of which were accepted by the Local Authority. Since then we have continued to engage with the Local Authority, the advocacy groups and the families. We also published a review of the progress made on those recommendations in November 2022. In the circumstances of the ongoing efforts by the Local Authority to resolve the longstanding issues at the site, the OCO committed itself to this further review of the agreed recommendations.

## **Final Review Process 2023/2024**

For this review, we;

- o wrote to the Local Authority for a progress update
- o met with the Local Authority staff including the Director of Housing and staff from the Traveller Accommodation Unit (TAU)
- o received a formal presentation from the Local Authority team and architects
- o met with two separate Traveller Advocacy Groups
- o visited the site to meet with complainants, residents and their children

## Update on recommendations.

### Recommendation 1

***Due to the significant and prolonged adverse impact on children living on this site, the oversight for the implementation of these recommendations must be held at Chief Executive (CE) level to ensure accountability and a ring-fenced budget.***

### 2024 Update

The oversight and proactive involvement by the Local Authority's Chief Executive has been important in achieving progress, particularly in the circumstances where the issues raised in our investigation were clearly complex and developed over time.

The level of commitment to improve the lives of children was clearly evident in all of our engagements with the Chief Executive and their senior management. It is also reflected in the extensive time and resources they have collectively dedicated to this site and associated projects.

There is real evidence of progress being made on all the agreed recommendations and we welcome the Chief Executive's commitment to implementing the recommendations in full.

### Recommendation 2

***The Local Authority should immediately review the housing applications and complaints made by the 11 families. If there were any administrative errors that may have adversely affected them and their children, redress should be provided including an acknowledgement of same.***

### 2024 Update

The Local Authority Internal Audit Section reviewed the housing applications and, based on the records available to them, confirmed that all information was considered and relevant procedures followed in the processing of the 11 families housing applications.

The Local Authority also introduced a new housing application appeals policy for residents in December 2021.

We further note that the Local Authority sent letters to all residents on the site in relation to this review mechanism. As such, we are satisfied that any potential adverse effect due to incomplete files has been addressed through this resolution mechanism.

### Recommendation 3

**The Local Authority should, without delay and in cooperation with the residents (including children), undertake a risk assessment of the site to immediately address the health and safety risks identified. Particular consideration should be given to the connection of all mobile units to plumbing and sewerage, the refurbishment of the welfare huts, the removal of fire safety hazards, the clearing of the children's passage to school and the consistent provision of waste management, pest control, electrical and other maintenance. The matter of illegal dumping on the site must also be addressed as a matter of priority.**

### 2024 Update

The site in question was originally designed to have 10 bays but currently caters for almost 50 families. Since *No End in Site* was published over €1.4 million to date has been spent on refurbishment and upgrading at the site. Those works were informed by an engineer's report in November 2021 and included: Care taker services; Welfare units; Mobile homes; Water supplies; Electricity works; Embankment work and new footpath; and other works to individual bays and mobile homes.

The Local Authority also engaged a specialist mediation service to assist in reaching an acceptable solution to the problem of overcrowding. The mediators consulted with the families on site and discussed their preferred option in terms of future accommodation.

The OCO understand that 11 families have been offered and accepted alternative accommodation based on their expressed needs and preferences. Other work identified and planned to take place includes:

- The construction of the school walkway and the necessary retaining wall was completed and opened in 2023.
- 10 new welfare units will be delivered to the site throughout 2024. These units have been allocated based on the needs of the individual families on the site.
- A proposed electrical upgrade for the site, which will include additional mini electrical pillars will greatly improve secure, reliable power connection for each of the families on the site and improve health and safety on site. This work is ongoing throughout 2024.
- Replacement of five mobile homes. Three have been delivered and connected to services. The remaining two have not been delivered to date as the offers were declined by the residents.
- A replacement day unit has been allocated to a family following extensive engagement with the resident concerned.

## Recommendation 4

**Due to the deficiencies in the current Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019-2024, the Local Authority should, without delay and in cooperation with the residents (including children), set out in particularised form how it will address the accommodation needs of the site residents in 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024 (including annual targets). The risk of failing to address the needs of this group, which is experiencing severe housing deprivation, is too great to allow the current paralysis in the system to continue.**

## 2024 Update

A comprehensive assessment in conjunction with the residents, traveller representative bodies and the *Traveller Accommodation Unit (TAU)* commenced in 2024. The specialist mediation service carried out a consultation with the families to determine the preferred permanent housing solutions.

A detailed proposal for 27 new housing units at the site and adjoining yard was produced.

Stage one funding of €17.9m for this project has been sought and approved by the *Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH)* in January 2024. The Local Authority advise that since then, consultation has taken place with residents of the site and their advocates. We are further advised that a public consultation process commenced in February 2024 and that the Chief Executive's report on the project was presented to the Local Authority's Council members in May 2024. The Council Members have since approved the project plan which can now progress to stage 2.

The Local Authority is also working to progress the development of a separate group housing scheme to accommodate a further 15 families from the site who had expressed a preference for traveller specific accommodation in an alternative location. Following extensive engagement with these families the local authority has identified a potentially suitable site for them to occupy.

The Local Authority told us that the TAU hold clinic appointments twice weekly for the traveller community to address issues of concern. Furthermore, the staff conduct regular site visits across all sites within Local Authority's jurisdiction. Bi- monthly meetings are also held with the traveller advocacy groups with seven taking place between May 2022 and November 2023. This is in addition to the TAU staff engaging with the advocacy groups by email, telephone calls and meetings as requested.

The Local Authority further issues updates to residents of the site on a regular basis. For example they notified them of a confined *Choice Based Letting (CBL)* competition; of the National Caravan Loan scheme; of fire awareness training; and updates as to the allocation of welfare containers. In this regard it is evident that the Local Authority has made a sustained effort to resolve the accommodation difficulties and conditions on the site. Furthermore, the Local Authority continues to apply extensive efforts and resources to help bring this long-term project to fruition.

## Recommendation 5

***The Local Authority should conduct an audit of all social housing applications from the families on this site, including those for Local Authority housing, group housing and halting sites. This audit should be completed independently of the Local Authority and inform accommodation planning under recommendation 4. It should also consider whether the current allocation system is appropriate in ensuring equal access to social housing for these families, with due regard to the findings of this investigation.***

## 2024 Update

The Local Authority engaged an independent organisation to conduct an audit of all social housing applications from families living on the site. They also employed a *Traveller Liaison Officer (TLO)* in February 2023 who has an extensive background working with the traveller community and in particular working with children.

From the conversations we have had with advocates and families it has been highlighted how important it is that each family continues to receive regular updates from the Local Authority on the efforts to meet their housing needs. This form of direct consultation is important and will hopefully lead to better outcomes and greater cooperation throughout the planning process, building phase and future management of the site.



## Recommendation 6

**The Local Authority should consider how Travellers who experience severe housing deprivation may be assisted proactively in navigating the housing Choice Based Letting system and the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme. The Local Authority should devise and share their Traveller specific policy setting out the same. The specific implementation of this policy should be included in the monthly management reports to Council Members.**

## 2024 Update

The Local Authority arranged for the Choice Based Letting system to be independently equality proofed and a National University was appointed to undertake an independent equality review of the system. This work was completed and presented to the Local Authority's *Strategic Policy Committee* in April 2022 and formally adopted by the City Council in September 2022. The main recommendations from the equality review were that:

- Travellers should continue to have access to the CBL system.
- A Traveller Liaison Officer should be recruited.
- There should be further reviews of accessibility of the CBL Letting platform.
- The issue of insertion of ethnic identifier option on housing applications to be raised with the Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH).
- Traveller cultural awareness training should be provided to the Local Authority's *Traveller Accommodation Unit (TAU)*.
- An audit to be undertaken of the policies, processes and operation of the CBL to ensure it functions in a manner that doesn't breach GDPR.

The Local Authority confirmed that An Comhairle, the full city council, approved all of the recommendations in the equality review. Since February 2023 two additional posts for the Traveller Accommodation Unit are being recruited.

## *Recommendation 7*

***The Local Authority should review the purpose, function and operation of the Traveller Accommodation Unit (TAU). This review should consider the capacity, resources and staff composition of the unit to ensure the following:***

- 1. Strategic planning for the development of Traveller Accommodation going forward.***
- 2. That a system is in place to ensure routine and emergency maintenance and upgrade works are addressed in a timely manner and that contracts with external service providers are proactively managed.***
- 3. Support to families with their individual housing needs, with particular regard to well documented psycho-social challenges faced by the Travelling Community.***
- 4. That structures are established through which regular engagement can take place with residents of halting sites and Traveller Representative Groups.***

## *2024 Update*

The Local Authority has demonstrated its efforts and commitment to meaningful engagement with the residents on site and their advocates. A full review of the TAU was carried out to consider the purpose, functioning, staffing, resources and training needs in the operation of the Unit. The recommendations from that review are being implemented.

A new caretaker is engaged 5 days a week on site and has been tasked with logging and reporting maintenance issues. A dedicated phone line has been linked to the TAU to aid residents and advocacy groups to log complaints and issues, and the Local Authority says it plans to introduce a text alert system for residents to communicate issues quickly.

As well as the appointment of the Traveller Liaison Officer the Local Authority advised that an additional clerical officer has been allocated to the TAU to allow maintenance issues and other works be responded to, as well as an engineer to carry out a risk assessment of the site.

## Recommendation 8

***The Local Authority should establish a specific complaint handling mechanism within the Traveller Accommodation Unit or, as an alternative, amend the current complaint process to ensure it is easily accessible and effective in managing complaints raised in the course of this investigation.***

## 2024 Update

The Local Authority has established a dedicated phone line for taking complaints within the TAU and a mechanism is in place for logging complaints. We are also told that the TAU has implemented a dedicated, computerised *Customer's Relations Management* system to enable complaints to be logged, tracked and followed up on directly.

These are very positive developments but the information provided by the residents and advocates suggest there are still problems with complaints being addressed after they have been logged. Specifically, there are persistent issues with general upkeep; maintenance and /or replacement of mobiles and welfare units.

The Local Authority has informed us that there is a schedule of works to address these issues but they have to consider the appropriateness of some longer term, more permanent works in the circumstances where residents may be vacating those mobiles.

## Recommendation 9

**The Local Authority should engage with other key agencies that have specific responsibilities for the health and welfare of children such as the HSE social inclusion unit, Tusla, local youth services and local schools. This child centred multi agency approach should focus on improving the lives of the children living on the site through dedicated actions such as access to youth services, educational supports and mental health services. Children should be active participants in this work. The Local Authority should consider utilising the local Children and Young People's Services Committee to support this.**

## 2024 Update

The Local Authority says it is committed to prioritising and re-emphasising the needs of the children who live there in all its actions and plans relating to the site. The Local Authority also committed to continuing its engagement with the local *Traveller Interagency Group (TIG)* (which includes the *HSE Social Inclusion Unit* and *Tusla, the Child and Family Agency*), to develop actions to improve the lives of children on this site.

The Local Authority have further engaged with the *Living Commons Initiative (LCI)*, a not-for-profit socially engaged art organisation that was established to found and maintain cooperative living, working and learning schemes for persons in precarious living situations.

The LCI is supported by project workers from advocacy groups who work with traveller children and its aim is to develop the concept of equal access to participation and a sense of belonging within public spaces. Funding of €3,000 has been secured for this project through the Local Authority's Art office with the support of the Traveller Liaison Officer.

The Traveller Accommodation Unit is also engaging directly with Tusla to address the issues faced by the travelling community residing at the site. Tusla is taking the lead in this initiative with the support of the Traveller Liaison Officer.

We have also been informed that the Local Authority, working on a cross directorate basis, is looking to carry out a *Health Impact Assessment (HIA)* to assist with the transition of families into future accommodation. The scope of the HIA is reportedly being determined, but will definitely involve engagement with traveller children on their needs and requirements. Importantly, it will involve the Local Authority and relevant outside agencies to help ensure positive outcomes.

The OCO welcomes the efforts by the Local Authority to focus on improving the lives of the children living on the site. However, there are other stakeholders including Traveller advocates, who could help the local authority to engage with Tusla and the LCI.

## Recommendation 10

***The Local Authority should in consultation with children residing on the site, take measures to ensure the provision of safe, dedicated play areas and activities, and should commit to reviewing this on an ongoing basis.***

### 2024 Update

The Local Authority plans regarding the layout of the proposed design of site and the group housing scheme will incorporate green areas and a designated play space.

We were informed that all plans will be discussed in detail with the families on site to secure “buy in” and agreement. A comprehensive consultation is being developed to ensure open and transparent engagement with all stakeholders, state agencies, advocacy groups, community and political representations to aid understanding/acceptance of the proposals.

We are also told that a Steering Group is to be established with responsibility for planning, coordinating and overseeing the actions and projects aimed at improving conditions on the site. This will primarily involve youth focused, as well as parenting support programs, or services to the traveller community.

The TAU is reported to be working on a tenant participation programme which respects and embraces the cultural values and preferences of the travelling community. The programme is aimed at supporting the creation of an environment where parents feel empowered, supported and invested in maintaining their tenancies and contribution to the overall community.

On this recommendation the Local Authority has demonstrated its commitment to spending time and resources to ensure that future coordinated planning at the site will include the active participation and contributions of children and young people.

# Conclusion

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Our review of the progress made on the recommendations contained in the *No End in Site* investigation is very encouraging. In this regard, the Ombudsman for Children is satisfied that sufficient and significant progress has been made by the Local Authority on each of the recommendations arising from the investigation.

We commend the Local Authority, the advocacy groups and the families and children concerned for their considerable efforts to engage with each other and with the longstanding problems at the site. This investigation is now concluded.

