



**Westmeath County Council**  
*Comhairle Chontae na hIarmhí*

**DRAFT TRAVELLER ACCOMMODATION  
PROGRAMME**

**2025-2029**

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# 1. Introduction

The Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998 requires Westmeath County Council to prepare, adopt and implement a new Traveller Accommodation Programme to meet the accommodation needs of the County's Traveller community over a five-year period from 2025 – 2029.

Circular Letter Housing 46/2023, issued by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 18th December 2023, requires Housing Authorities to prepare, for adoption and implementation, a Traveller Accommodation Programme for the period from 1st January 2025 to 31st December 2029 as per Section 10(1) of the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998. The Minister has specified 31st December 2024 as the latest date by which Accommodation Programmes must be adopted.

The adoption of a Traveller Accommodation Programme or an amendment to or replacement of the Programme by a relevant housing authority shall be a reserved function as provided for under Section 7 (3) of the 1998 Act.

In summary, the Council is required to:

- Prepare and adopt an Accommodation Programme to meet the existing and projected needs of Travellers in County Westmeath.
- Allow for public input to the preparation and amendment of the Programme.
- Have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and protect human rights in our work, and in this Programme, in accordance with our Public Sector Duty (S.42(1) Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014).
- Include objectives concerning Traveller Accommodation in the County Development Plan.
- Take appropriate steps to secure implementation of the Programme.

Under the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, Section 13, 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”*.

The Traveller community was officially recognised by the State as an Ethnic Minority in March 2017. In a statement to Dail Eireann, the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, TD, noted that the Traveller community has their own unique heritage and culture and that it is reasonable to identify as both a Traveller and Irish.

Westmeath County Council recognises this and endeavours to provide accommodation supports to the Indigenous Travelling community, having regard to their recognition by the State as an Ethnic Minority.

## 2. Legislative Context of the Traveller Accommodation Programme

The Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998 came into effect on 10th September 1998. The primary purpose of the Act is to provide a comprehensive legislative framework, which requires housing authorities to meet the accommodation needs of Travellers normally resident within their administrative areas.

The provisions of the Act play an integral part in promoting social inclusion and equality and counteracting discrimination that may be experienced by members of the Traveller Community. The Act further provides for a comprehensive and planned response by Housing Authorities in meeting the varying accommodation needs of the Traveller community, a process underpinned by a thorough consultative process with all concerned interests.

Sections 21 and 22 of the Act provide for the establishment of a Local Traveller Consultative Committees (LTACC) in each Local Authority to advise on the provision and management of accommodation for Travellers, including the preparation and implementation of the Traveller Accommodation Programmes. The membership of the LTACC comprises of elected members, officials and local Traveller representatives.

The provisions of the 1998 Act are reflected in the structure of this Traveller Accommodation Programme.

## 3. Policy Statement

Westmeath County Council is committed to addressing equality and human rights concerns for all in the delivery of its Housing functions, including Traveller Accommodation, by the promotion of the values of dignity, inclusion, social justice, democracy and autonomy.

Specific reference is made to the Traveller community in the County Development Plan. The wider but related issues of social inclusion and equality are also embedded in the following Westmeath County Council policy documents.

- Westmeath County Council, County Development Plan 2021-2027.
- Westmeath County Council, Local Economic and Community Plan 2023 – 2028.
- Westmeath County Council, Corporate Plan 2024 – 2029 (Draft – for adoption in late 2024).

### 3.1 Westmeath County Council, County Development Plan Housing Strategy:

The Housing Strategy is a critical component of the County Development Plan and plays a key role in translating national housing policies and housing supply responses to the local level. The Housing Strategy informs the policies and objectives of the Development Plan and provides details in relation to housing provision and its location and requirements for different house types, sizes and tenures and the requirements for residential zoned land. In order to ensure that the plan-making system is supported by a robust methodology to inform policies and funding initiatives around housing and associated land requirements, the National Planning Framework (NPF) introduced a new requirement for each Local Authority to develop a Housing Need Demand Assessment (HNDA).

The key objectives of the Housing Strategy are:

- *To identify the existing need and likely future demand for housing in the area of the County Westmeath Development Plan.*
- *To ensure Westmeath County Council provides for the development of sufficient housing to meet projected future demand over the lifetime of the County Development Plan.*
- *To ensure that sufficient zoned lands are provided to meet the needs of different households of all types and tenures.*

Westmeath County Council recognises Travellers' identity as an indigenous ethnic group with their own unique heritage and culture. It is a policy of Westmeath County Council to provide accommodation to Travellers in accordance with the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998.

### 3.2 Provision of Accommodation

It is the policy of Westmeath County Council to provide a high standard of living accommodation based upon the distinct needs of Travellers which will be accommodated in so far as possible.

Traveller Accommodation can be simply defined as any form of housing occupied by members of the Travelling Community, and in practice means standard housing (whether owner occupied, Council, private rented with assistance from the Council or independently), Traveller accommodation sites and group housing schemes.

Accommodation needs will be assessed in accordance with statutory provisions of the Housing Acts 1966 – 2014, and relevant regulations. Qualified applicants will be considered for available accommodation in accordance with Westmeath County Council's adopted Allocations Scheme.

The full range of housing options available in the provision of accommodation for Travellers include:

- Standard social housing
- Traveller Group Housing
- Traveller Halting Site Accommodation

- Social Leasing Scheme/Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS)
- Private rented accommodation with support of Housing Assistance Payments (HAP)
- Private house ownership – Tenant Purchase Scheme; Local Authority Home Loan; Housing Adaptation Grants; Vacant Homes Grant; Improvement Works in Lieu of Housing; Affordable and cost rental

Westmeath County Council shall continue to engage on Traveller issues through the Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee (LTACC).

Traveller Accommodation forms part of the Council's overall housing stock and shall be managed on the same basis as conventional housing. Policies such as Anti-Social Behaviour, Tenancy Agreements, and all other relevant policies, as referenced in the Tenant Handbook, apply.

The Council will, with the continued agreement of the residents on site, progress plans to refurbish and upgrade Blackberry Lane Traveller Accommodation to deliver permanent group housing at the site.

Traveller households that have a family member with a disability may also be supported with measures provided for under the Council's Strategy for Housing of Persons with Disability.

Homelessness can arise from time to time for members of the Travelling Community and supports may be made available by the Council's Homeless Service under the Midlands Regions Homeless Action Plan.

## 4. Review of Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019 – 2024

### 4.1 Existing Accommodation Provision

Westmeath County Council has been proactive in providing accommodation for Travellers throughout the years. This is evident in the accommodation provided, including Traveller specific housing, standard housing, and assistance in securing private rented accommodation.

Current Traveller Specific Accommodation in Westmeath is as follows:

- 2 Halting Sites – 30 permanent bays and 16 transient bays.
- Group Housing – 6 units.

### 4.2 Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019 – 2024

Westmeath County Council adopted its Traveller Accommodation Programme on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2019.

Over the period of the plan, the Council housed 95 Traveller Households in standard Council Houses, Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) and Housing Assistance Payment (HAP), thereby achieving the target set in the Programme.

Adaptation works were carried out on 8 properties tenanted by members of the travelling community under the LA Housing Adaptation Grant scheme to provide for proper accommodation due to disability. A further property was substantially completed during the lifetime of the Programme.

€680,656 was spent by Westmeath County Council during this 5-year period on the management and maintenance of the Halting Sites and Group Housing at Blackberry Lane and St. Michael's Park.

Agreement was reached with the residents of Blackberry Lane for the upgrade of the site to replace permanent and transient bays with group housing. The project appraisal was submitted to the Department of Housing and an initial budget allocation of €18m was approved in December 2022. Ongoing consultation took place with the residents throughout 2022 and 2023 to discuss the requirements for the brief for the engagement of design consultants.

Quarterly meetings of the LTACC under the joint Chairs, Cllr. Mick Dollard and Cllr. Andrew Duncan took place during the lifetime of the plan.

## 5. Consultation Process

The Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, and the directions given by the Minister, place particular emphasis on the need to engage in appropriate consultation with relevant bodies and the public generally in drawing up and adopting a Traveller Accommodation Programme. This includes consultation with other adjoining local authorities, Health Service Executive, Approved Housing Bodies, local Traveller organisations and groups, the LTACC, other relevant community groups and the public in general. The purpose of this broad consultation process is to ensure that the interests of all concerned with or affected by proposals for Traveller Accommodation are considered and to facilitate a planned and comprehensive response by housing authorities to the accommodation needs of Travellers.

On 18<sup>th</sup> December 2023 Mr. Keiran O'Donnell Minister for State, Planning and Local Government issued Circular Housing 46/2023 directing housing authorities to commence preparation for the next 5-year Traveller Accommodation Programmes (TAPS) for Adoption by 31<sup>st</sup> December 2024.

Notice of the intention to prepare a Draft Traveller Accommodation Programme 2025-2029 and inviting submissions at an early stage in the process was communicated to the LTACC, the HSE, adjoining Housing Authorities and Voluntary/Community Bodies as deemed appropriate including local Traveller organisations. Submissions were received from 3 parties listed in Appendix One. These submissions were considered in the preparation of this plan and have been incorporated into the plan as appropriate.

Sections 6, 8, 9 and 15 of the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 provide for the giving of specific forms of notice in this regard. All such requirements have been complied with, in the preparation of this document.

In providing accommodation under this programme the Housing Authority will comply with statutory requirements which are in place in relation to public consultation, such as the provisions of Section 179 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended) and Part 8 of the Planning and Development Regulations, 2001 (as amended).

## 6. Assessment of Need and Projected Need

### 6.1 Assessment of Need

Section 6 of the Housing Act 1988 (as amended) requires each relevant Housing Authority, for the purpose of preparing a programme, in respect of their functional area, to make an assessment of the accommodation needs of Travellers who are assessed under Section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 as being qualified for social housing support, including the needs for sites. In making an assessment, a Housing Authority is required to have regard to:

- An estimate of the number of Travellers for whom accommodation will be required during the course of the programme.

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

### 6.2 Survey of Travelling Families in County Westmeath – January 2024

A housing needs assessment was carried out of identified Traveller families in January 2024. This assessment reflects the needs of those families who agreed to take part. This assessment was carried out by the Westmeath Traveller Project. Other information in relation to traveller families was based on data already available to Westmeath County Council and when assessing the need Westmeath County Council also had regard to:

- 2023 Traveller Families Annual Estimate,
- 2023 Housing Needs Assessment,
- Regular contact with Travellers and Traveller representatives,
- The views of the LTACC,
- Transfer applications.



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

A total of 474 families were identified as living in County Westmeath.

### 6.3 Current Accommodation Occupied

*Table 1 – Current Traveller Household Accommodation Type*

<b>Type of Accommodation</b>	<b>Number of families</b>
Permanent Halting Site Bay	22 (of 30 Bays available)
Group Housing	6 (of 6 houses available)
Transient	16
Standard Local Authority Housing	218
Private Rented	72
House Acquired by Travellers without Local Authority assistance	110
Tenant Purchase	28
Side of Road	0
HAP	23
Shared in standard Local Authority lettings	18
Shared private accommodation	2
Shared private rented accommodation	2
Caravans in rear gardens	9

### 6.4 Future Accommodation Needs 2025-2029

It is estimated that a total of 67 Travellers will reach the age of 18 during the lifetime of the proposed programme.

In determining the projected need, Westmeath County Council had regard to the fact that not every person over 18 years will apply for housing/accommodation and some may leave the County.

It is not possible to accurately predict the projected need during the term of this programme. However, it is expected that a proportion of the 67 persons reaching the age of 18 during the lifetime of this programme will apply for accommodation. It is not possible to establish the accommodation preference of these individuals at this stage.

Based on the analysis of where Travellers are currently living and the assessment of need carried out in conjunction with Westmeath Traveller Project, while also acknowledging the likely accommodation needs of those turning 18 during the lifetime of the plan, it is considered that a total of 135 units of accommodation should be provided over the 5-year programme.

## 6.5 Traveller Accommodation 5-Year Programme

The delivery of 135 units will address both the current demand and future projections. This target includes the accommodation of vacancies which may arise in the two halting sites within the County during the lifetime of the programme. The Programme aims to meet existing needs while also preparing for anticipated increases in demand, ensuring that the region's housing infrastructure remains responsive and adequate for the growing population.

It is considered that HAP will provide 35 units over the 5-year programme with the remaining 100 units being delivered by all other sources of accommodation as outlined in Table 3.

*Table 2 – Overall Traveller Accommodation Programme Targets by Year*

	Year					Total
	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	
<b>No of Units of accommodation</b>	26	26	27	28	28	135

Annual targets for Traveller Accommodation Programme 2025-2029 by accommodation type:

*Table 3 – Traveller Accommodation Programme Plan by Accommodation Type and Year*

Type	Year					Total by Type
	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	
Standard Local Authority Housing	11	11	12	13	14	61
Traveller Group Housing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Halting Site Bays	1	1	1	1	1	5
Transient Bays	0	0	0	0	0	0
Halting Site Refurbishments	0	0	0	0	0	0
Group Housing Refurbishments	0	0	0	0	0	0
RAS/Leasing	4	4	4	4	4	20
Part V	3	3	3	3	2	14
HAP	7	7	7	7	7	35
<b>Total by Year</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>135</b>

### **Blackberry Lane:**

Agreement was reached with the residents of Blackberry Lane site for upgrade of the site to replace permanent and transient bays with group housing. A total of 41 houses are to be completed in the Development. It is anticipated that these works will be undertaken during the lifetime of this plan. These units are not currently reflected in the above table.

## 6.6 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 is 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
- House purchase loans
- Voluntary housing schemes
- HAP
- RAS
- Rural local authority housing

## 6.7 Provision and Objectives

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

- 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.
- Acquisition of rural houses to suit individual applicants may be considered in exceptional circumstances and where all other options have been exhausted.
- Approved Housing bodies providing houses during the period of the programme will be expected to have regard to the needs of Traveller families in accordance with the terms of the programme.
- Provision of accommodation under the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS).
- Provision of accommodation under the Housing Assistance Payment scheme (HAP).
- The Council will make available appropriate loans and grants to Travellers to allow them to purchase or provide their own accommodation subject to them meeting the appropriate criteria in relation to the allocation of loans and grants and such loans and grants being available.

## 6.8 Caravan Loan Scheme

A review of the national Pilot Caravan Loan Scheme 2023 is currently being undertaken nationally. Westmeath County Council did not partake in the Pilot Scheme. The Council, in conjunction with the LTACC, will consider the findings of the National Review.

## 6.9 Unauthorised Encampments

Unauthorised encampments will be dealt with in accordance with appropriate legislation.

## 7. Strategy Statement

- 7.1 Responsibility for implementing this programme rests with Westmeath County Council and in doing so, it will liaise with and seek the assistance of the appropriate statutory and voluntary bodies.
- 7.2 The provision of accommodation for Travellers through group housing and standard social housing will in the first instance be carried out directly by the Housing Authority. Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) will also provide accommodation through their normal allocation process. The provision of accommodation by these bodies has traditionally been dependent on assistance from the State or Local Authorities by 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.
- 7.3 Likewise where individual Traveller families are willing to undertake the provision of their own accommodation the Housing Authority will seek to encourage and assist them in this regard.
- 7.4 It is noted that during the life of this programme, the proposed Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) will continue as a method of social housing support that will satisfy need.
- 7.5 In implementing the provisions of this programme the Housing Authority will seek to achieve understanding and acceptance of the respective preferences, needs, rights and legitimate concerns of both Travellers and the general public.
- 7.6 In accordance with the provisions of the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998, there will be ongoing consultation with the Traveller community. Progress on the implementation of this programme will be continuously monitored by the Housing Authority in consultation with the Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee.
- 7.7 A report will be presented annually to the Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee outlining progress on achievement of the annual targets set out in the implementation section of the programme and the Local Authority will consider any recommendations made by the Consultative Committee in this regard. An annual progress report will be included in the Local Authority Annual Report.
- 7.8 In addition, a report outlining progress in implementation will be presented to the Housing, Community and Culture Strategic Policy Committee at the end of each year of the programme.
- 7.9 In undertaking the provision of accommodation under this programme the Council recognises the need to put in place effective strategies for the future management and maintenance of such accommodation.

Furthermore, appropriate measures will be implemented in this regard including the application to such accommodation of the Housing Authorities policies and practices for good estate management and tenant participation and in particular the following policy documents:

- Statement of Policy on Housing Management for Rented Local Authority Housing Stock (Section 9 of Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1992).
- Westmeath Allocations Scheme.
- Westmeath County Council – Anti-Social Behaviour Policy.
- Regional Homeless Action Plan (under development) or any amendments to the above.

7.10 It is essential that adequate arrangements be put in place for the management and maintenance of Traveller accommodation. In line with the management and maintenance of the Council's housing stock, including that tenanted by Travellers. Traveller specific accommodation will be included in the Council's standard management and maintenance arrangements. This involves the Central Housing Department including sites in their normal management and maintenance structures as implemented by its Housing Maintenance Clerk of Works and Repairs Team.

7.11 The Council will support and promote the involvement by Travellers in the estate management of their halting sites. A group under the auspices of Westmeath Community Development has been established to maximise the use of the community centre in Blackberry Lane as a resource for the residents. The Council will also encourage the involvement of Travellers in estate management initiatives where Travellers are residing in Local Authority housing schemes.

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

## 8. Responsibility for Providing Accommodation

Westmeath County Council will accept responsibility for the provision of accommodation for the following categories of Travellers:

- (a) Travellers specifically identified in the Assessment of Needs carried out in 2023 as being in need of accommodation or in any future assessment of needs carried out during the lifetime of this programme.
- (b) New family units or households formed during the lifetime of this plan comprising family members of the households at (a) above.

- (c) New Traveller families who move into the area of the Local Authority during the lifetime of this plan and who satisfy the Local Authority that they have a genuine need to be accommodated in the area and who do not have accommodation available to them in any other Local Authority area.

The Council will not accept responsibility for providing accommodation for Traveller families (including traders) who from time to time move into the area. Equally the Council will decline to assist, if they are satisfied that applicants have adequate accommodation available to them in other areas or have had specific traveller accommodation provided for them under Traveller Accommodation Programmes of other housing authorities or possess the means to provide such accommodation.

Generally, Westmeath County Council has always reserved the right to refuse to provide accommodation to any household, irrespective of ethnicity, if the following was deemed the case: -

- By their own act, deed, or commission, have deprived themselves of adequate accommodation.
- Were proven to be involved in serious or on-going anti-social behaviour.
- Good estate management would be compromised if accommodation was provided.

## 9. Standard Local Authority Housing /Approved Housing Bodies

The Council has identified the need to provide accommodation for 60 Traveller households in standard local authority or voluntary housing within the period of this TAP.

Travellers will be offered housing in accordance with the Council's Allocations Scheme. This scheme outlines the criteria and order in which housing is allocated to applicants.

Staff are available to assist individuals with completing their housing applications.

This support aims to ensure that applicants have the necessary help and guidance to successfully navigate the application process and support those with digital literacy issues.

This approach aims to provide appropriate housing options for Travellers while promoting sustainable communities and ensuring tenants are well-prepared for their new homes.

## 10. Homelessness

The Council recognises the vulnerability of Travellers who are experiencing homelessness and continues to collaborate closely with the Traveller community to assist individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. As outlined in the Council's Allocations Scheme, priority is awarded to homeless persons alongside other specific categories of individuals in need of housing. Families and other applicants presenting as homeless, as well as those with priority status, are allocated social homes as they become available, based on their respective times on the waiting list.

In the interim, while awaiting the availability of social homes, homeless families are supported by the Council's Homeless Unit and the HAP Place Finder which helps those who find themselves homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

The Unit provides comprehensive assistance to help families at risk of homelessness find private rented accommodation. The Council is committed to ensuring that all individuals in need receive the necessary support and guidance during their time of need and recognises the literacy and digital issues facing Travellers who are seeking to access Homeless services.

## 11. Review of Traveller Accommodation Programme 2025-2029

Annual targets will be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that progress is being maintained.

Regular reporting will be provided to the Senior Management Team, the Housing Strategic Policy Committee, and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

A report on all activities under this programme will also be furnished at each LTACC meeting. Section 17 (1) (a) of the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, provides that a relevant housing authority shall review its Traveller Accommodation Programme at least once in each three-year period, or at such time as directed by the Minister.

Any amendment to the Traveller Accommodation Programme proposed following any such review must be made within seven months and is subject to the same procedures and requirements, including public consultation.

The adoption of a Traveller Accommodation Programme or an amendment to or replacement of the Programme by a relevant housing authority shall be a reserved function as provided for under Section 7 (3) of the 1998 Act.

The Minister has, under section 17(1) of the 1998 Act, that a review of the next Traveller Accommodation Programme should be carried out no later than 30th June 2027.

## 12. Conclusion

The most effective means of implementing this Programme will be through a process of partnership with the Traveller community and widespread consultation with all interested parties. The LTACC and the Elected Members will also have an important role to play in the process. It will provide a structured forum for dialogue between Travellers and the Council.

The Council is confident that the approach set out in this Programme to address the provision of suitable accommodation and living conditions for Travellers has potential to succeed subject to the following:

- Central Government commitment to providing the necessary capital resources.
- The availability of a five-year structured programme setting out clear, focussed accommodation targets and objectives and a practical approach to implementation and achievement of these objectives.
- An ethos and acceptance by all parties that consultation must be meaningful and relevant.
- The availability of dedicated resources in Westmeath County Council.
- A successful estate management forum process.
- A pro-active Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee.
- A good working relationship between the Local Authority and Traveller community in the county.



## APPENDIX 1

Pre-Draft Submissions were received from the following: -

- Westmeath Community Development & Westmeath Traveller Project
- Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness
- Irish Traveller Movement, National Traveller Women's Forum & Pavee Point Traveller & Roma Centre

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