17 February, 2015.

Ms. Tara Kelly,

Clerk to the Assembly,

British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly,

Leinster House,

Kildare Street,

Dublin 2.

**RE:** REP146/AK/15

Dear Ms. Kelly,

I have been asked by Mr. Alan Kelly, T.D., Minister for Environment, Community and Local Government to refer to your letter of the 13th January 2015 in connection with the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly plenary meeting.

The Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government notes the findings of the Report on Travellers, Gypsies and Roma: access to public services and community relations prepared by Committee D of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, in particular the observations and recommendations made in paragraphs 20-32 of this report which specifically address Traveller accommodation issues. Officials from this Department met with members of the committee in January 2014 and welcomed the opportunity to outline this Department’s approach to the provision of accommodation for Traveller families. The Department’s detailed response to the report and the finding of the Committee is set out below:

**Traveller Accommodation Policy**

The Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 provides the statutory responsibility for the assessment of the accommodation needs of indigenous Irish Travellers. In accordance with this legislation, the preparation, adoption and implementation of multi-annual Traveller accommodation programmes, designed to meet the accommodation needs of Travellers, rests with individual housing authorities.

The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government has ensured that a sound legislative and financial system is in place to assist the authorities in providing such accommodation.

**Accommodation for Travellers**

Accommodation for Travellers is provided across a wide range of options, including standard local authority housing, Traveller-specific accommodation, private housing assisted by local authority or voluntary bodies, private rented accommodation and through their own resources. Details of the accommodation position of Travellers at the end of 2013 are provided in Appendix 1. Data in relation to the position at the end of 2014 is currently being finalised.

**Social Housing Needs Assessment**

Travellers are free to express a preference for any form of accommodation through the

Assessment of Needs process. The 2013 Social Needs Assessment indicated that 2% of household on the housing waiting list require Traveller-specific accommodation. These requirements will be addressed in the course of the current round of Traveller Accommodation Programmes. The majority of those who qualified for Social Housing (89%) did not have a specific accommodation requirement.

Some Traveller groups have voiced concerns that some Travellers are effectively being coerced into private rented accommodation as a result of the lack of Traveller-specific accommodation available. While there is no empirical evidence that this is the case, the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee (NTACC) as part of its work programme, and following on from the Research Report into why Travellers leave Traveller-specific accommodation (details below), has commissioned a joint research project with the Private Residential Tenancies Board (PRTB) into the experience of Travellers living in private rented accommodation. This research will consider some of the concerns raised by Traveller groups on the matter and inform future policy.

**Traveller Accommodation Programme**

Under the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, local authorities are statutorily required to prepare and adopt multi-annual Traveller Accommodation Programmes to meet the accommodation needs of Travellers. Three rounds of Traveller Accommodation Programmes (TAPs) have been concluded and in 2014 authorities adopted their fourth round of programmes which will run from 2014-2018. These programmes set out local authority investment priorities for Traveller accommodation for the following five years and identify the accommodation needs of Travellers and how these needs are to be met, using all of the housing supply options available to the local authority, including Traveller-specific accommodation.

Consultation with all relevant bodies, including Travellers and their representative bodies is a keynote in the preparation, adoption and implementation of these programmes. The legislation places a strong emphasis on consultation with all relevant interests in the preparation of programmes. The programmes are prepared in consultation with Travellers as well as with other public authorities, community and other relevant bodies and the public in general. Submissions in relation to the programmes are sought by public advertisement. In particular, local authorities are required to consult with the Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committees which are comprised of members and officials of the local authority and representatives of local Travellers and Traveller bodies. These consultative arrangements ensure that the interests of all parties concerned with, or affected by, proposals for Traveller accommodation are considered and facilitate a planned and comprehensive response by local authorities to the accommodation needs of Travellers.

Significant progress has been achieved in the delivery of Traveller accommodation.

* During the first Traveller Accommodation Programme (2000 – 2004) alone, some 1,371 additional Traveller families were provided with permanent, secure accommodation.
* The second programme (2005 – 2008) resulted in 775 units of new and refurbished Traveller-specific accommodation while also accommodating an additional 458 families in standard local authority housing.
* The third Traveller Accommodation Programme (2009 – 2013) had, by the end of 2013, provided 1532 units of accommodation to Traveller families across a range of housing types including standard local authority housing, Traveller-specific accommodation and families accommodated through the Rental Accommodation Scheme or in voluntary housing. This includes over 490 units for Traveller-specific accommodation supported by the provision of over €50 million in capital funding.
* The fourth Traveller Accommodation Programmes were adopted in 2014 and will run from 2014-2018. As a result, 2014 was a transition year between the ending of the current programmes and the roll-out of the new programmes. There was a very strong emphasis on planning during 2014 to ensure that the programmes to be implemented until the end of 2018 meet the needs of Travellers in local authority areas. The increased funding to be provided in 2015 will assist in progressing some of these programmes.

**Funding - Traveller Accommodation budget**

The Department provides 100% capital funding for the provision and refurbishment of Traveller-specific accommodation. This ring-fenced funding stream is additional to general Social Housing funding, which Travellers also benefit from.

The Department also provides funding for accommodation-related supports to operate in tandem with the capital programme (local authority Social Workers and Caretakers). This funding includes recouping 90% of Social Workers salaries and 75% of Caretakers salaries along with 50% of actual expenditure on routine repair and maintenance costs, including sanitation costs, and 50% of actual skip hire expenditure for halting sites. The role of social workers is very important in assisting Traveller families in both Traveller-specific accommodation and other accommodation. Caretaker and management and maintenance programmes are crucial for maintaining conditions on site and protecting the Travellers’ day-to-day standard of living.

The capital allocation for 2015 for Traveller-specific accommodation is €4.3m (an increase of €1.3m over the 2014 allocation) and €4m for current expenditure (an increase of €1m on 2014). These significant increases demonstrate the Department’s practical assistance to local authorities in the delivery of their Traveller Accommodation Programmes.

**National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee**

The National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee (NTACC) was established on a statutory basis under the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998. The purpose of this committee is to advise the Minister in relation to Traveller accommodation matters generally. This committee is very inclusive and representative in nature, comprising 12 members, including an independent Chairperson, representatives from the three Traveller Representative groups (Irish Traveller Movement, Pavee Point and the National Traveller Women’s Forum), County and City Manager’s Association, Association of Irish Local Government, Department of Justice & Equality, and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive along with the Department’s own senior official responsible for Traveller accommodation issues within the Department. The current committee is the fifth such committee, appointed in September 2013 for a three year term

**Research Report on Why Travellers Vacate Traveller-specific accommodation**

As a result of issues raised during the course of meetings of the NTACC, the committee, in 2013, commissioned a study by the Housing Agency to ascertain why Travellers leave their accommodation vacant. While the research explored two different perspectives, that of local authorities and the Traveller community, there was broad consensus among both groups about the fact that Travellers **are** leaving Traveller-specific accommodation and the main reasons for this. The focus is now on how this can be prevented and ensure that accommodation provided at considerable expense is used to meet the housing need of Travellers. The NTACC has considered the report and its implications for future policy and has made recommendations which were presented to former Minister Jan O’Sullivan in 2014 and published on the Department’s website. Arising from these recommendations, the NTACC set up 3 sub-groups, as follows:

1. Research into the experience of Travellers living in private rented accommodation
2. Role of Social Workers
3. Data Collection

The outcome of these pieces of research will be considered by the Committee, presented to the Minister and inform future policy.

**Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committees (LTACCs)**

Sections 21 and 22 of the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 require each relevant local authority to establish a Local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee (LTACC), to facilitate consultation locally between housing authorities and Travellers on Traveller accommodation issues. These local committees generally run for a 5 year period. The current committees were established following the local elections in 2014. At the establishment of new committees, the Department provided comprehensive advice on the role and composition of these committees. Information/education seminars are also being organised. The NTACC are due to hold a seminar for the new LTACCs in order to support these committees and ensure their continued focus and compliance with the legislation.

**Unauthorised Sites**

In 2013 there were 361 living on unauthorised sites which was a slight increase on the 2012 figures of 360 families.  While any increase in numbers is undesirable the percentage increase as a percentage of the overall figures is less than a half a percentage (0.31%) in the overall numbers of families on unauthorised sites from 3.34% in 2012 to 3.65% in 2013, and is still well below the increases seen in previous years. In 1999, prior to the introduction of the first round of Traveller Accommodation Programmes, 25% of Traveller families were recorded as living on unauthorised sites. It was noted that of the 361 families on unauthorised sites, almost 44% (158 families) had not applied for any accommodation.

The total number of families living on halting sites has decreased by 38 and now stands at 524 families. The number of families living on halting sites has been in a relatively slow decline for a number of years. In 2006 the number stood at 1,131 families and this number has continued to fall each year since then.

**Culturally Appropriate Homes (CENA)**

The Department has been working with Irish Traveller Movement for some time in establishing a Traveller-led Approved Housing Body.  In October 2013, Approved Housing Body status was granted to CENA - Culturally Appropriate Housing.  The Department has committed to the provision of sufficient funding to CENA to advance capital projects for the provision of Traveller specific accommodation. As an approved housing body, CENA can apply for State funding for housing projects and the Department is already in discussions with CENA regarding future projects and funding requirements.  CENA has signed up to the Voluntary Regulation code for Approved Housing Bodies in Ireland indicating its determination to play a significant role in the housing provision for Travellers in the coming years.

Since the award of AHB status, the Department has been working with CENA and the Irish Council for Social Housing to develop a pilot scheme for the construction and management of two sites (1 halting site and 1 group housing scheme) in a rural and urban area. The Department is funding the appointment of a Consultant to review proposals received from Local Authorities for the pilot scheme to select the two sites for development.

I trust that this letter provides a comprehensive summary of the actions taken by this Department to meet the accommodation requirements of Travellers.

Yours sincerely,



**Larry Kelly,**

**Private Secretary**