



Tithe an Oireachtais

An Comhchoiste um Thithíocht, Rialtas Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht

Tuarascáil Eatramhach maidir le hEaspa Dídine

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Houses of the Oireachtas

Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Interim Report on Homelessness

April 2021

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PREFACE



Homelessness has been a growing issue and an increasingly prevalent feature of Irish society in recent years. As such, it is a priority of the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage to examine the causes of and solutions to homelessness, as well as the lived experiences of those affected by homelessness, and to provide recommendations to address related issues where possible.

Following a number of reports in the media and elsewhere surrounding an increase in fatalities in people experiencing homelessness throughout 2020, as well as concerns surrounding an overconcentration of homeless services in the centre of Dublin and a lack of homeless services outside of Dublin, the Committee decided to hold a meeting to examine these issues and related matters.

Although it is acknowledged that homelessness will likely remain a feature in Irish society until a sufficient amount of appropriate social and affordable housing can be provided, the Committee intends to prioritise the examination of homelessness issues and aims to highlight the matter as a regular feature of Committee business.

On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank Mr Brendan Kenny and Ms Mary Flynn of the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive DRHE, Ms Una Burns from NOVAS, Professor Eoin O' Sullivan from Trinity College Dublin, and Ms Alice Leahy of the Alice Leahy Trust who presented to the Committee.

The Joint Committee gained valuable insights into recent issues both for those experiencing homelessness and for those providing homeless services, and as a result has made a number of recommendations which are both practical and achievable.

The Joint Committee is committed to monitoring progress made on the implementation of the recommendations in the report and look forward to further engagement on the topic in the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Matthews". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Steven Matthews TD
Chair of the Joint Committee

INTERIM HOMELESS MEASURES

1.1 PRESENTATION TO THE COMMITTEE

Mr Brendan Kenny and Ms Mary Flynn of the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive (DRHE), Dr Una Burns from NOVAS, Professor Eoin O’ Sullivan from Trinity College Dublin, and Ms Alice Leahy of the Alice Leahy Trust addressed the Committee on the topic of homelessness on 29 January 2021.

At the outset of the meeting the witnesses outlined various long-term trends and developments in homelessness as seen in recent years and also highlighted particular significant developments since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although several witnesses highlighted policies which are effective in preventing and reducing homelessness, it was widely acknowledged that the provision of large-scale state-funded social housing tenancies is critical to ending homelessness.

Several key concerns and issues emerged from the exchange between the witnesses and the Committee including, but not limited to –

- the success of the eviction moratorium in preventing entries to emergency accommodation;
- the importance of a holistic inter-agency response to tackling homelessness;
- the expansion of Housing First;
- the rollout of Homeless HAP outside of Dublin;
- issues in Quality Standards and Inspections;
- training in Trauma-Informed Care;
- possible implications of the double welfare payment.

1.2 ISSUES ARISING

Eviction Moratorium

Professor Eoin O’Sullivan informed the Committee that the restrictions on termination of tenancies in the private rented sector – the biggest driver of numbers in emergency accommodation – had led to the lowest ever numbers of new entries into emergency accommodation by April 2020. He noted that the figures then began to rise over the course of the year but were declining again in November and he suspected also in December-January due to the moratorium on termination of tenancies. Professor O’Sullivan noted that if the Committee were discussing the issue in 2019 it might have been said that such a moratorium was unconstitutional, yet one has been implemented and the impact on homelessness has been significant. The Committee notes that the then-current moratorium on evictions would end on 15 March, and in this regard Professor O’Sullivan suggested that there was strong justification for extending that moratorium irrespective of the COVID-19 pandemic. Professor O’Sullivan proposed that perhaps it would strike a fair balance in relation to the constitutional arguments if the moratorium were to be extended with a review on the extension taking place every quarter.

Holistic Inter-Agency Approach

Ms Alice Leahy spoke to the Committee about the importance of recognising the complexities surrounding the circumstances of those who engage with homeless services and highlighted the need for a complex examination of the issue if a resolution is to be found. Ms Leahy noted that there

are two angles from which to view homelessness: the more simplistic structural causes due to lack of housing supply, and the social and personal issues that lead to homelessness which are much more complicated. Ms Leahy noted that people that present as homeless can have a myriad of social problems related to the complexity of their personal and unique human condition, with intergenerational poverty relating to poor finance and education and the absence of the opportunity to work and have a stake in society all playing a role. Child poverty, neglect, abuse, violence and drug and alcohol use can all lead to low self-esteem and mental health issues, with homelessness the result.

Ms Leahy informed the Committee that government, interdepartmental and inter-agency collaboration is required to address these profound issues, but it is meaningless unless the views of front-line workers are listened to.

Dr Una Burns spoke further of the requirement of an inter-agency approach and informed the Committee that dual diagnoses of mental health problems and addiction is a significant issue and access to support services can be difficult for this group. Dr Burns advised the Committee that often Novas clients are moved between addiction and mental health services, with each declining to work with clients because of the other issue.

Training in Trauma-Informed Care

The Committee notes that staff working in homeless services regularly deal with people who have experienced and continue to experience significant trauma in their lives. In this regard, Dr Burns advised the Committee that front-line staff, social care workers and social workers should be trained in trauma-informed care. Dr Burns noted that it is vital to acknowledge the trauma faced by the people engaging with homeless services and to recognise that challenging behaviour is a natural response to significant trauma experienced. Dr Burns noted that the single site research carried out by Novas, where all staff are trained in trauma-informed care, has shown that this training has significantly reduced the number of serious incidents in Novas services as staff are able to de-escalate incidents more quickly and support people into a safe-space.

Expansion of Housing First

The Committee heard that the Housing First policy is clear evidence-based policy that works effectively, particularly for those with complex needs. Professor O'Sullivan told the Committee that a core element of Housing First is not solely the provision of housing but the reconnection of individuals to their extended families, their communities and having space for people to stay overnight and to reconnect with children. In this regard Professor O'Sullivan noted that it might be necessary for the relaxation of the rule that Housing First tenants are only allocated a one-bedroom unit and advocated for flexibility in this aspect. Professor O'Sullivan noted that there is a fear that if people have a spare bedroom then other guests may disrupt the Housing First tenancy but said these are anecdotal stories and there is no hard evidence that this is the case.

In its submission to the Committee, Novas noted also that in many cases if a person experiencing homelessness does not have the primary care of their children they are not entitled to more than a one-bed unit of accommodation on the social housing waiting list, and because they cannot access a two-bed unit Social Work cannot recommend the reunification of the parent with his or her children as they do not have suitable accommodation for the child to visit, stay or eventually live. Novas notes that this is a vicious circle and deeply impacts on their client's mental health, whose overriding

motive to recover from addiction and homelessness may be the ambition to reunite with their children.

Rollout of Homeless HAP outside of Dublin

During the meeting the Committee heard from the witnesses that the provision of Homeless HAP in Dublin has been very successful in preventing homelessness in the region. In this regard Professor O'Sullivan noted that every quarter between 400 and 500 people are prevented from entering emergency accommodation, usually through the provision of Homeless HAP. Mr Brendan Kenny also noted the success of the HAP system. However, Dr Burns noted that the HAP discretion rate outside Dublin is 20% while in Dublin it is 50% and advised that this is an issue as the 20% rate is not enough. Dr Burns noted that Simon Communities have recently published a report that showed that not one property in the private rented market in Limerick can be accessed through HAP, nor through the 20% elevated Homeless HAP. The Committee also heard of the significant difficulties single people have in accessing one-bedroom accommodation within the HAP limits. Members also noted that this was the case in other urban areas such as Cork also. Dr Burns advised that consideration should be given to applying the Dublin discretion rate elsewhere in the country - even on an interim basis - until more public and social housing becomes available.

Quality Standards and Inspections

The Committee heard from Mr Kenny that there is a National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF) which applies to all NGO facilities in the country, which is monitored overall by the DRHE. Mr Kenny noted that the DRHE is in the process of transferring that framework to other premises that are managed by private operators, and that it is in the process of undertaking a procurement process to get an independent company to carry out inspections of all hostel premises in the city, both NGOs and private. The Committee asked why the NQSF does not currently apply to private providers, and questioned what inspections are taking place in these providers if there are no standards available, and what standards inspections are being measured against. In this regard Mr Kenny noted that there was never a decision not to have the NQSF apply to private providers, but they were introduced at a time when most of the accommodation was managed by NGOs.

The Committee also queried why an independent body such as the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) is not being chosen by the DRHE for the inspection of public and private providers to which Mr Kenny replied that there would be no objection to HIQA monitoring or inspecting emergency accommodation but stated that that this would be a matter for Government to decide to give it this role.

In this regard the Committee notes that in its Report on Family and Child Homelessness¹, the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage of the previous Dáil recommended that consideration be given to allowing HIQA to conduct independent statutory inspections and monitoring in all homeless services.

1

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_housing_planning_and_local_government/reports/2019/2019-11-14_report-on-family-and-child-homelessness_en.pdf

Implications of the double welfare payment

Dr Burns informed the Committee that the double payment of social welfare introduced at the start of the pandemic was a significant issue for people in addiction as people were using larger amount of substances resulting in a greater number of overdoses, and sadly this may have contributed to the increase in deaths over the past year. Dr Burns noted that in McGarry House in Limerick during the first lockdown, the number of times Novas had to administer naloxone more than doubled compared to 2019 due to the increase in overdoses as a result of the double payment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

The Committee recommends that:

1. Consideration be given to extending the moratorium on evictions following the lifting of the 5km travel restrictions.
2. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage liaise with the Department of Health and ancillary health providers to ensure that there are no barriers to service for those with dual diagnoses of addiction and mental health difficulties and to ensure that the client-centred approaches, in particular rapid access to methadone treatment if requested, identified as successful during the pandemic, are retained.
3. The Housing First initiative be significantly expanded and for targets to be revised annually in a Housing First Needs Assessment. Further, for the Housing First scheme to ensure that single people with overnight access to their children are provided with two-bedroom accommodation.
4. The maximum discretionary uplift seen in the HAP allowance utilised in Dublin local authorities be expanded to local authorities in other counties where necessary to meet housing needs, particularly for single-person households.
5. HIQA be appointed to conduct independent statutory inspections and monitoring in all homeless services.
6. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage engage with the Department of Social Protection to raise awareness of the harmful effects, such as in cases of people experiencing addiction, that can result from the double payment of social welfare in some cases and to implement procedures to support clients who might want to mitigate against this.
7. An agreed methodology be introduced between the HSE, the Department of Housing and the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive, for recording the deaths of people experiencing homelessness or people accessing homeless services, and to agree what procedures are put in place by all relevant service providers to ensure that there are adequate Adult Safeguarding Reviews of such deaths.

8. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage liaise with local authorities, homeless service providers, and the HSE to ensure the funding and roll out of trauma-informed practice for all those providing frontline supports to people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, in accordance with health and safety obligations.
9. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage set annual targets for Local Authorities for the provision of various house types with particular reference to one- and two-bed housing units via the Repair and Lease scheme.
10. Inspections of emergency accommodation for homeless people which were suspended due to COVID-19 be resumed immediately.
11. The National Quality Standards Framework be applied to all services for all people who have become homeless as was originally intended, including to privately-operated Emergency Accommodation that is in receipt of public funds.
12. In all instances where the provision of accommodation for people who have become homeless is being sought, NGOs and not-for-profit organisations should be permitted to tender to provide this accommodation.
13. The use of Private Emergency Accommodation be quickly phased out and replaced with Supported Temporary Accommodation, Housing First and appropriate long-term housing.
14. The Minister, in conjunction with local authorities and homeless service providers, develop a plan to ensure an adequate supply of emergency accommodation in all Local Authorities in areas where it's needed in order to reverse the over-concentration of homeless facilities in places such as Dublin Central.
15. The Minister, in conjunction with homeless service providers, phase out the involvement of private security firms in emergency homeless accommodation and provide a timeline for doing so.
16. Key workers/housing support workers be assigned to all people experiencing homelessness.
17. Dedicated wrap around supports including social, health and housing supports be provided to users of privately-operated homeless services.

APPENDIX 1 - ORDERS OF REFERENCE

a. Functions of the Committee – derived from Standing Orders [DSO 95; SSO 71]

1) The Dáil may appoint a Departmental Select Committee to consider and, unless otherwise provided for in these Standing Orders or by order, to report to the Dáil on any matter relating to—

- (a) legislation, policy, governance, expenditure and administration of—
 - (i) a Government Department, and
 - (ii) State bodies within the responsibility of such Department, and
- (b) the performance of a non-State body in relation to an agreement for the provision of services that it has entered into with any such Government Department or State body.

(2) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall also consider such other matters which—

- (a) stand referred to the Committee by virtue of these Standing Orders or statute law, or
- (b) shall be referred to the Committee by order of the Dáil.

(3) The principal purpose of Committee consideration of matters of policy, governance, expenditure and administration under paragraph (1) shall be—

- (a) for the accountability of the relevant Minister or Minister of State, and
- (b) to assess the performance of the relevant Government Department or of a State body within the responsibility of the relevant Department, in delivering public services while achieving intended outcomes, including value for money.

(4) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall not consider any matter relating to accounts audited by, or reports of, the Comptroller and Auditor General unless the Committee of Public Accounts—

- (a) consents to such consideration, or
- (b) has reported on such accounts or reports.

(5) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order may be joined with a Select Committee appointed by Seanad Éireann to be and act as a Joint Committee for the purposes of paragraph (1) and such other purposes as may be specified in these Standing Orders or by order of the Dáil: provided that the Joint Committee shall not consider—

- (a) the Committee Stage of a Bill,
- (b) Estimates for Public Services, or
- (c) a proposal contained in a motion for the approval of an international agreement involving a charge upon public funds referred to the Committee by order of the Dáil.

(6) Any report that the Joint Committee proposes to make shall, on adoption by the Joint Committee, be made to both Houses of the Oireachtas.

(7) The Chairman of the Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall also be Chairman of the Joint Committee.

(8) Where a Select Committee proposes to consider—

- (a) EU draft legislative acts standing referred to the Select Committee under Standing Order 133, including the compliance of such acts with the principle of subsidiarity,
- (b) other proposals for EU legislation and related policy issues, including programmes and guidelines prepared by the European Commission as a basis of possible legislative action,
- (c) non-legislative documents published by any EU institution in relation to EU policy matters, or
- (d) matters listed for consideration on the agenda for meetings of the relevant Council (of Ministers) of the European Union and the outcome of such meetings,

the following may be notified accordingly and shall have the right to attend and take part in such consideration without having a right to move motions or amendments or the right to vote:

- (i) members of the European Parliament elected from constituencies in Ireland,
- (ii) members of the Irish delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and
- (iii) at the invitation of the Committee, other members of the European Parliament.

(9) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order may, in respect of any Ombudsman charged with oversight of public services within the policy remit of the relevant Department consider—

- (a) such motions relating to the appointment of an Ombudsman as may be referred to the Committee, and
- (b) such Ombudsman reports laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas as the Committee may select: Provided that the provisions of Standing Order 130 apply where the Select Committee has not considered the Ombudsman report, or a portion or portions thereof, within two months (excluding Christmas, Easter or summer recess periods) of the report being laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas.

b. Scope and Context of Activities of Committees (as derived from Standing Orders) [DSO 94; SSO 70]

(1) The Joint Committee may only consider such matters, engage in such activities, exercise such powers and discharge such functions as are specifically authorised under its orders of reference and under Standing Orders;

(2) such matters, activities, powers and functions shall be relevant to, and shall arise only in the context of, the preparation of a report to the Dáil/Seanad;

(3) it shall not consider any matter which is being considered, or of which notice has been given of a proposal to consider, by the Joint Committee on Public Petitions in the exercise of its functions under DSO 125(1) and SSO 108(1); and

(4) it shall refrain from inquiring into in public session or publishing confidential information regarding any matter if so requested, for stated reasons given in writing, by—

- (a) a member of the Government or a Minister of State, or
 - (b) the principal office-holder of a State body within the responsibility of a Government Department or
 - (c) the principal office-holder of a non-State body which is partly funded by the State,
- Provided that the Committee may appeal any such request made to the Ceann Comhairle, whose decision shall be final.

(5) It shall be an instruction to all Select Committees to which Bills are referred that they shall ensure that not more than two Select Committees shall meet to consider a Bill on any given day, unless the Dáil, after due notice to the Business Committee by a Chairman of one of the Select Committees concerned, waives this instruction.

c. Powers of Committees (as derived from Standing Orders) [DSO 96; SSO 72]

Unless the Dáil/Seanad shall otherwise order, a Committee appointed pursuant to these Standing Orders shall have the following powers:

(1) power to invite and receive oral and written evidence and to print and publish from time to time—

- (a) minutes of such evidence as was heard in public, and
- (b) such evidence in writing as the Committee thinks fit;

(2) power to appoint sub-Committees and to refer to such sub-Committees any matter comprehended by its orders of reference and to delegate any of its powers to such sub-Committees, including power to report directly to the Dáil/Seanad;

(3) power to draft recommendations for legislative change and for new legislation;

(4) in relation to any statutory instrument, including those laid or laid in draft before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas, power to—

(a) require any Government Department or other instrument-making authority concerned to—

- (i) submit a memorandum to the Joint Committee explaining the statutory instrument, or
- (ii) attend a meeting of the Joint Committee to explain any such statutory instrument: Provided that the authority concerned may decline to attend for reasons given in writing to the Joint Committee, which may report thereon to the Dáil, and

(b) recommend, where it considers that such action is warranted, that the instrument should be annulled or amended;

(5) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State shall attend before the Joint Committee to discuss—

(a) policy, or

(b) proposed primary or secondary legislation (prior to such legislation being published),

for which he or she is officially responsible: Provided that a member of the Government or Minister of State may decline to attend for stated reasons given in writing to the Joint Committee, which may report thereon to the Dáil: and provided further that a member of the Government or Minister of State may request to attend a meeting of the Joint Committee to enable him or her to discuss such policy or proposed legislation;

(6) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State shall attend before the Joint Committee and provide, in private session if so requested by the attendee, oral briefings in advance of meetings of the relevant EC Council (of Ministers) of the European Union to enable the Joint Committee to make known its views: Provided that the Committee may also require such attendance following such meetings;

(7) power to require that the Chairperson designate of a body or agency under the aegis of a Department shall, prior to his or her appointment, attend before the Select Committee to discuss his or her strategic priorities for the role;

(8) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State who is officially responsible for the implementation of an Act shall attend before a Joint Committee in relation to the consideration of a report under DSO 197/SSO 168;

(9) subject to any constraints otherwise prescribed by law, power to require that principal office-holders of a—

(a) State body within the responsibility of a Government Department or

(b) non-State body which is partly funded by the State,

shall attend meetings of the Joint Committee, as appropriate, to discuss issues for which they are officially responsible: Provided that such an office-holder may decline to attend for stated reasons given in writing to the Joint Committee, which may report thereon to the Dáil/Seanad; and

(10) power to—

(a) engage the services of persons with specialist or technical knowledge, to assist it or any of its sub-Committees in considering particular matters; and

(b) undertake travel;

Provided that the powers under this paragraph are subject to such recommendations as may be made by the Working Group of Committee Chairmen under DSO 120(4)(a)/SSO 107(4)(a).

APPENDIX 2 - MEMBERSHIP

Deputies: Francis Noel Duffy (GP)
Joe Flaherty (FF)
Thomas Gould (SF)
Emer Higgins (FG)
Steven Matthews (GP) - Chair
Paul McAuliffe (FF)
Eoin Ó Broin (SF)
Cian O’Callaghan (SD)
Richard O’Donoghue (IND)

Senators: Victor Boyhan (IND)
John Cummins (FG)
Mary Fitzpatrick (FF)
Rebecca Moynihan (LP)
Mary Seery Kearney (FG)

Notes:

1. Deputies nominated by the Dáil Committee of Selection and appointed by Order of the Dáil of 30 July 2020.
2. Senators nominated by the Seanad Committee of Selection and appointed by Order of the Seanad on 18 September 2020.
3. The Dáil Committee of Selection nominated Deputy Joe Flaherty to replace Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor on 2 February 2021.

APPENDIX 3 - LIST OF WITNESSES

- ❖ **Mr Brendan Kenny, Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Ms Mary Flynn, Acting Director, Dublin Regional Homeless Executive**
- ❖ **Ms Alice Leahy, Director, Alice Leahy Trust**
- ❖ **Dr Una Burns, Head of Policy and Communications, Novas**
- ❖ **Professor Eoin O’Sullivan, Trinity College Dublin**

APPENDIX 4 – LINK TO MEETING TRANSCRIPT

- ❖ [Meeting of Friday, 29 January 2021](#)

APPENDIX 5 – LINKS TO OPENING STATEMENTS

- ❖ [Ms Alice Leahy, Director, Alice Leahy Trust](#)
- ❖ [Professor Eoin O’Sullivan, Trinity College Dublin](#)
- ❖ [Mr Brendan Kenny, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Dublin Regional Homeless Executive](#)
- ❖ [Dr Una Burns, Head of Policy and Communications, Novas](#)