



## **Housing and Homelessness**

### **Submission to the Committee on Housing & Homelessness**

**From**

**Novas**

**26<sup>th</sup> May 2016**

## **Novas**

Good afternoon, my name is Una Burns and I am the Communications Manager with Novas. These are my colleagues Anne Cronin, Head of Homeless Services and John Rogers, Head of Property and Design.

We would like to begin by thanking you for the opportunity to present to the Committee on Housing and Homelessness today. We welcome the overarching nature of the committee and its focused approach to the current housing and homeless crisis. We have already contributed to the Dublin and Limerick Network presentations so will avoid repeating the issues raised in these presentations.

Novas is a national organisation providing services to families and individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness throughout Ireland. We are a tier 2 organisation providing 217 units of accommodation. Our output is focused in the Mid-West, Kerry and Dublin. We are the largest providers of homeless accommodation in the Mid-West region. Last year we worked with more than 2,200 people. We play a vital national role in supporting some of Irish society's most vulnerable households by providing a range of preventative services, supported temporary accommodation, long-term housing and drug, mental health and disability services to marginalised persons, many of whom are not served by mainstream services or existing voluntary organisations. We support our clients around the pillars of Housing, Health and Recovery.

Our clients are extremely vulnerable and present with increasingly complex needs including entrenched drug use, inter-generational poverty, poor education, family breakdown, experience of trauma, enduring mental health issues, dual diagnosis and repeated experiences of the criminal justice system.

The current housing crisis is reducing their ability to exit homelessness so that they are becoming more deeply entrenched in the cycle.

Our presentation today will highlight the current obstacles and provide some specific actions that can immediately address the crisis and move people out of homelessness. It will encompass both elements of our organisation – in terms of our homeless and ancillary services and our ability as an approved housing body to provide long-term housing for this marginalised group.

We will make recommendations around prevention, housing, finance and additional supports.

## Recommendations

We will firstly provide some recommendations around prevention

### Prevention – social welfare supports and advocacy

- Maintain rent limits available under the HAP homeless pilot to 50% above rent supplement levels.
- Extension of HAP for Homeless to urban centres outside Dublin and Cork. As the housing and homeless crisis is a national one, the HAP homeless pilot should be extended nationally. The HAP provision itself also needs to be revised. Our experience in Limerick is that there is a period of time between when a household secures a home and when the HAP payment is received, in some cases of up to three weeks. At present there is no facility for reimbursement for the intervening period so a vulnerable household is beginning their new tenancies already in arrears. Instances where there is a gap between when a household begins to pay rent and when they receive HAP, there must be a reimbursement facility for that period.
- For households in receipt of rent supplement, the rates should be increased. However, increasing HAP and RS is not sufficient without the implementation of rent controls linked to the consumer price index. We believe that nobody should become homeless because of the gap between a household's income and rent prices. While in some cases CWO's exercise discretion in increasing payments where risk of homelessness is evident, it is not happening across the board and our family service in Limerick has responded to a number of cases where households have presented at risk of homelessness because the increased payment has been denied by their CWO. We advocate that this discretion is utilised in all instances where there is a risk of homelessness driven by economic reasons.
- The Tenancy Protection Service (TPS) in Dublin and Cork has done immense work in preventing homelessness among thousands of families (8,550 adults and children) through accelerating and enhancing HAP and RS payments and advocating on behalf of tenants. This should be extended nationally.
- Revert the reduced social welfare payment to under 25's. This group have a housing need the same as those over 25 years old.

**By redirecting resources to preventative measures, we will reduce the number of households entering temporary and emergency accommodation, which is very expensive and provides very poor outcomes, particularly for families.**

## Housing

- Long-term social housing building programme planned and implemented, in the region of 50,000 units and a partnership approach between the state and AHB's in the provision of same. We cannot continue to depend on the private market to provide homes and solve the housing crisis. It is simply not working.
- Mix of housing stock developed, particularly the development of units for single adults. One-bed apartments are particularly difficult to source in the private-rented market. In Ireland, 75% of current households comprise of three individuals or less, all future housing development must reflect this.
- Speedier turn-around of vacant social housing units as well as refurbishment of remaining voids within the stock and other housing stock. The Housing Agency's report earlier this week highlighted 230,000 vacant homes in Ireland. Furthermore, Stephen Kinsella, senior lecturer in Economics, UL, recently noted in an article in the Sunday Business Post that 30% of property in Limerick was vacant. This needs to be explored. Bringing some of these properties up to habitable standards, in the areas of highest need can provide for some of the immediate need.
- More social housing available to Housing First projects throughout the country. Currently in Limerick, there is no social housing available for Novas' Housing First programme in the city and it is entirely dependent on the private rented market. On this point, discretion needs to be shown by local authorities around the provision of market rent for single individuals in two-bed apartments. Two-bed units are very often a better option for single individuals, particularly those engaging in Housing First, due to the type of property (own front door), the availability of this property type compared to one-bed units and the potential access such clients might have to their children. These would also free AHB's to purchase two-bed units for single occupancy use.
- In 2014 the Implementation Plan of the State's Response to Homelessness, 2014 recommended that the Department of Social Protection review the current scheme of provision of rental support where two or more formerly homeless people share accommodation, so that rent supports would be attached to the person rather than the property. Considering the support needs of such individuals, the maximum rent limits can be exceeded where there is a special housing need, including homelessness. However this recommendation is not acted upon at local level. We urge the committee to re-visit this recommendation and ensure it is enforced on the ground as it would make the development of long-term housing for formerly homeless people more economically viable.
- No reduction in funding for emergency accommodation until more funding is directed towards housing led approaches. While we are fully committed to providing housing led solutions, our temporary accommodation services throughout the country are full. Demand continually outstrips capacity. In our STA services in Limerick in April, just 25% of referrals were able to access accommodation due to demand.
- The cyclical nature of the housing crisis is exacerbating the situation in emergency accommodation services. Clients are bed-blocking because of the lack of move-on accommodation, while other very vulnerable individuals are denied access due to capacity.

We have been providing low-threshold accommodation in Limerick for 14 years and already a very clear pattern of inter-generational poverty and neglect has emerged. While this is not unique to Limerick, compared to our services in other regions of the country, it does appear more intrinsically ingrained. We recommend interagency research in the regard among all the statutory and non-statutory agencies working with this group in the city so that we can provide evidence based solutions.

- A recognition of and the development of targeted solutions to rural homelessness. In our Thurles service last year, just 4% of all referrals were able to access accommodation. This year so far the figure is 6%. In the same region on the night of 24<sup>th</sup> of May, there were 17 adults and 13 children residing in B&B accommodation. Inter-agency, rural specific solutions needs to be developed.

### **CALF**

**We are a homeless charity with the ability to develop new stock in the form of long-term housing for homeless people. Some small structural changes to existing funding vehicles could enhance our ability to do this.**

- Frontload accelerated CALF payments to enhance AHB's ability to provide social housing. Novas has embraced fully the CALF model of funding and has developed a numbers of new services via this stream of funding, however the protracted payment method is impeding greater investment and development by AHB's. For example, throughout 2015 and early 2016, Novas purchased eight homes for homeless families through the CALF facility at a cost of €1.253m. We have received 15% of the 30% of the cost provided under CALF but are awaiting a payment of €180,300 for the properties, some of which were bought more than 12 months ago. A change in the two-tiered administration system (at Department level and local authority level) to one overarching system would make the facility more efficient. While the current system does not impede delivery, it does extend the timeline.
- The delivery of new build outside of major urban centres is challenging due to the revenue available to service debt and overall cost of development. Cost of development includes VAT and where applicable site acquisition. Measures that would reduce costs ( vat , cost of land/increased access to state land etc) would significantly assist in increasing output and the potential to deliver housing in locations where rental incomes currently don't make delivery of new build viable.

### **Additional Supports**

- Integrated mental health services for homeless people, particularly those with a dual diagnosis. A recent report (September 2015) by the Partnership for Health Equity, reporting on the health of homeless people in Dublin and Limerick, found the general wellbeing of homeless people to be significantly lower than that of the general population. More than 90% of those who participated in the survey had a physical and/or mental health condition. HSE budgets need to be increased to enable the provision of such services.
- Wrap-around mental and general health services should be provided to Housing First clients, seeking to live independently.

- Specific services should be provided to pregnant women living in homeless accommodation or at risk of becoming homeless in the Mid-West, some of whom are entrenched drug users, including a dedicated community midwife. Novas regularly works with pregnant women, who return to STA services after birth with no specialised pre-natal or post-natal care.

On a macro level we advocate for a greater partnership approach between government and the voluntary sector. We urge a greater recognition of the societal value provided by the latter sector, in terms of volunteer engagement, funding and philanthropy and the provision of services to some of society's most marginalised people so that the tendering process is re-evaluated with greater weight to the skills of the service provider.