

Dear Editor

The Dáil goes into summer recess this week. It is due to sit again on Tuesday, September 19. The next column will be sent to you on Friday, September 22. Thank you for your continued support

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County Offaly has highest rate of homelessness in the Midlands

County Offaly has the highest rate of homelessness in the Midlands region, with 35 adults living in emergency accommodation in May, Sinn Féin Deputy Carol Nolan told the Dáil.

“We need to use CPOs and look at using vacant shops which should be converted into residential accommodation in towns and villages,” she said. “Twelve single parent families and a total of 54 children are living in emergency accommodation in the Midlands region. This fact cannot be ignored. We talk all the time about mental health and building resilience in children. These kids will end up with serious problems and we will have more problems than we currently have. We need to deal with this issue head on and to protect the most vulnerable. If this is to be a true republic, we much cherish all of the children of the nation equally and give people fair play. It is about time we stopped caving into the banks.”

Deputy Nolan said in County Offaly-North Tipperary over 2,500 people are on the social housing waiting list. “My office is dealing with people who are living in overcrowded accommodation, being evicted from private rented accommodation, in mortgage arrears and, increasingly, families seeking emergency accommodation,” she said. “Last week in my constituency office I dealt with a lady who was in mortgage arrears. She had fallen into arrears because she needed a serious, life-saving operation in London. She has done her utmost to work with the banks and meet their demands, but she ended up in my office last week in a very distressed state with a heavy-handed letter, of which I still have a copy. It has to stop immediately. The banks should be instructed to abandon their bully-boy tactics and treat people with fairness, empathy and dignity.”

To add insult to injury, Deputy Nolan said Census figures show that there are 3,000 vacant dwellings in County Offaly. “These dwellings should not be lying idle at a time when families have nowhere to call home,” she said. “The majority on housing lists could be housed in these dwellings. The Minister needs to provide sufficient funding to bring them into use. We need urgent action; words will not do it for us.”

Concern at reduction in public dental service in the Midlands

The lack of dental check-ups in the Midlands public dental service was raised in the Dáil by Fine Gael Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy. From 2008 to 2017, County Offaly has seen

an increase of 4% in the population, while County Laois has seen a much larger increase of 25% in the same period, she said.

“There has been a reduction in dental surgeons available to provide basic dental care,” she said. “This has led to significant concerns for parents who were depending on the programme which had been rolled out to first class, fourth class and sixth class pupils. Despite the increase in the number of children eligible to avail of the service, the number of whole-time equivalent dental surgeons has reduced dramatically in counties Offaly and Laois by 56%. As far back as 2009, fourth class had to be dropped from the service altogether, while only first and sixth class targeted for routine treatment. Now in 2017, only sixth class is being targeted. As for first class children, preventive treatment will be provided to them only if resources are available.”

Deputy Corcoran Kennedy said the Midlands public dental department needs an increase of at least 3.5 whole-time equivalents to return to the previous provision of the service to first, fourth and sixth class. “We know best practice guidelines advise that, at the very least, children should have an annual check-up,” she added.

Responding on behalf of the Minister for Health, Minister of State Catherine Byrne said she was informed by the HSE that, based on current staffing levels, the dental service in the Midlands has targeted children in sixth class in the school year 2016-2017. Where resources permitted, children in first class were also targeted for preventive treatment. The HSE anticipates the service will target sixth class again in the next academic year.

“The Minister, Deputy Harris, has asked the HSE to investigate this matter and write directly to the Deputy,” she said.

Nolan seeks additional classroom for Birr school

The reason why Scoil Náisiúnta Naomh Eoin, in Rath Birr in County Offaly, which had been allocated a new classroom teacher, has not been given approval for additional classroom accommodation to provide for the increased numbers in the school was sought in the Dáil by Deputy Carol Nolan.

In reply, Minister Richard Bruton said the area in which the school is located has not been identified as an area of demographic growth. “The Department considers that there are sufficient primary school places in the school planning area to meet pupil demand and in that context, the application for additional accommodation was not approved,” he said. “In that context, my Department has suggested to the school that it use its available accommodation to meet immediate accommodation requirements.”

However, Deputy Nolan said the board of management of this school submitted an application to the capital appraisal section of the Department of Education and Skills for additional accommodation because it is a growing school. “There are certainly increasing numbers in this school and the fact that it had been allocated another teacher proves this. I do not buy in to that excuse.”

“The Department also advised that the school use the multi-purpose room as a classroom,” she said. “This multi-purpose room is totally unsuitable. It does not have toilet facilities and the room currently is used as a multi-sensory room for children with special needs.”

The Minister added that the difficulty for the planning department is that while this school is growing, there are several other schools in the neighbourhood which are declining and which have available spaces. “That is where the dilemma occurs,” he added.