



Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs
Opening Statement by the Ombudsman for Children, Dr Niall Muldoon
Wednesday, 19 June 2019

I would like to thank the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs for inviting me to appear today to discuss the impact of homelessness on children.

As members of the Committee are aware, the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) is an independent statutory body, which was established under the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002 (as amended). The OCO has two core statutory functions, namely:

- to promote the rights and welfare of children under 18 years of age
- to examine and investigate complaints made by or on behalf of children about the administrative actions of public bodies, schools or voluntary hospitals that have or may have had an adverse effect on children.

The rights and welfare of children experiencing homelessness has been a strategic priority for my Office since 2016. In light of the ongoing crisis in homelessness, including family homelessness, the circumstances of children experiencing homelessness will remain a priority for my Office as part of our Strategic Plan for the period 2019 to 2021.

Family homelessness emerged as a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland in 2014. As members of the Committee know, there has been a steady increase in the number of families experiencing homelessness in Ireland: the number of homeless families has increased by 243% since April 2015. The monthly data reports published by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) provide an insight into, if not a comprehensive picture of, the number of people experiencing homelessness. According to the DHPLG's most recent monthly Homelessness Report, during the week 22 to 28 April 2019, there were 1,729 families with 3,794 children accessing local authority managed emergency accommodation. Highlighting that family homelessness affects families all over the country, 75% of these families were in the Dublin region while 25% of these families were accessing emergency accommodation in each of the eight other regions across the country. That 58% of families accessing emergency accommodation in April 2019 were one-parent families reminds us that one-parent families are among certain types of families who are more at risk of homelessness. Other types of families who are more at risk include young parents aged 18 to 24 years and larger families with four or more children.

As members of the Committee are aware, the adverse effects of homelessness on families and children have been a focus of sustained concern and have received considerable attention in

recent years, with research consolidating regular media reports highlighting the damaging impact of homelessness on family life and functioning, on children's education, and on parents' and children's physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing. A report from Temple Street Children's University Hospital in January 2019 highlighted that 842 children who attended the hospital's Emergency Department in 2018 were discharged with no fixed address - an increase of 29% on the 2017 figure. According to this report, although the children's presentations are varied and complex, the majority of them *"stem from the fact that these children are living in completely unsuitable, cramped and temporary accommodation"*.

A majority of families with children who present as homeless are still being provided with emergency accommodation in hotels and B&Bs, notwithstanding a recognition by Government that hotel and B&B accommodation is wholly inappropriate to the needs of families with children and a corresponding commitment to end this practice. Similarly, the practice of self-accommodation, which requires families to find their own emergency accommodation in a hotel or B&B that is then paid for by their local authority, continues to operate in certain circumstances. This is despite an acknowledgement that self-accommodation needs to be brought to a close. I am very concerned about the impact that these continuing practices are having on homeless families and children and that there do not appear to be clear timelines in place for bringing an end to these practices.

As members of the Committee know, the development of Family Hubs emerged in 2017 as an alternative to hotels and B&Bs as regards providing for the emergency, temporary accommodation needs of homeless families. While Family Hubs may be preferable to hotels and B&Bs, they have developed and proliferated in the absence of an evidence base, an initial pilot phase or clear public policy objectives for their use. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government indicated in an update on Rebuilding Ireland to the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government on 29 May that there are currently 27 Family Hubs in operation nationally providing 650 units of accommodation and that further Hubs are being developed.

In light of how Family Hubs emerged and are being developed further, my Office wanted to learn more about what it is like for children to live in Family Hubs. Between October 2018 and January 2019, my Office undertook a consultation that involved engaging with 37 children between 5 and 17 years of age and 33 parents of 43 children under 5 years of age who were living in a Family Hub at the time. I would like to use the remaining time available to briefly highlight to the Committee a number of issues and recommendations contained in a report by my Office called 'No Place Like Home', which we published in April 2019 and which highlights the views and experiences of children living in Family Hubs.

As members of the Committee know, there is no typical or standard Family Hub. Some Family Hubs are purposely designed and adapted while others are former hotels, B&Bs and residential homes. Some Hubs are run by NGO homelessness service providers while others are run by private, commercial operators. The eight Family Hubs involved in our consultation (five in the Dublin area, two in Limerick and one in Cork) varied accordingly, in terms of who they are operated by, their location, size and the facilities and supports provided.

This variation is reflected in the perspectives shared by the children, young people and parents who participated in our consultation and told us about what they liked about living in a Family Hub, what they found challenging about it and what changes they would like to see in the Family Hubs.

As regards positives, younger children spoke about making and having friends in the Family Hub where they lived. Those who had access to outdoor play space and equipment identified this as a positive feature. Younger children living in Family Hubs with Child Support Workers on site spoke positively about the activities organised by them. It is important to note that several younger children could not identify anything positive about living in a Family Hub, with some children responding simply with the word “*nothing*”. Children aged 13 to 17 identified a number of positives, including the support provided by staff working in the Family Hub where they lived. Facilities such as computers, a TV room and/or study room, where provided, were also regarded as positives. Some older children regarded living in a Family Hub as comparatively better to where they had been previously – for example, as being less crowded than living in overcrowded conditions with extended family or as offering more stability than living in a hotel or B&B. Parents of children under 5 years of age welcomed the relative security and stability provided by Family Hubs when compared with more precarious living arrangements, including hotels. They also spoke about the support of staff working in the Family Hub where they lived. Parents living with their children in Family Hubs that had good facilities, activities for their children and/or access to a Child Support Worker highlighted these as positive features.

Members of the Committee who have had an opportunity to read ‘No Place Like Home’ will be aware that the perspectives shared by children, young people and parents who participated in our consultation also point to real difficulties that living in Family Hubs present for them. In summary, their accounts highlight the negative impact that living in this type of environment is having on family life; parenting; individual and family privacy; children’s ability to get adequate rest and sleep; children’s health, wellbeing and development; children’s ability to learn and study; children’s opportunities for play and recreation; children’s exposure to aggression and fighting; children’s freedom of movement; and children’s ability to maintain relationships with extended family and friends.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the children we met frequently expressed feelings of sadness, confusion and anger. For example, one 10 year old girl said: *“Some days I didn’t even want to wake up because I didn’t want to face this day ... I am tired in school. Some days I would just sit there and not even smile.”*

For us, one of the most concerning features of the perspectives shared by children is the consistency with which they referenced feeling ashamed about being homeless and living in a Family Hub. Similarly, parents consistently spoke about feeling they had failed in their role as parents. Exacerbating the already challenging circumstances that parents and children who are homeless find themselves in, such feelings of shame and failure underscore the very real corrosive impact that homelessness can have on people’s sense of their own dignity and worth.

As such, the accounts of these children and parents recall the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, who has characterised homelessness as a violation of human rights because the lived

experience of homelessness *“challenges the very core of what it means to be human, assaulting dignity and threatening life itself.”*

Arising from the experiences and perspectives shared by children and parents and having regard to relevant international standards and developments concerning family homelessness in Ireland, we have identified a number of priorities for action, which are outlined in ‘No Place Like Home’. Among these priorities are the following:

Policy and provision

- Timelines need to be put in place for bringing an end to the practices of self-accommodation and providing emergency accommodation to families in hotels and B&Bs.
- An independent, formal evaluation of the suitability of Family Hubs as an approach to providing emergency, temporary accommodation needs to be undertaken.
- Additional measures are needed to combat the stigma associated with family homelessness and to support the dignity, self-worth and resilience of children and parents experiencing homelessness. Practical measures that need to be seriously considered in this regard include increasing the number of Child Support Workers, therapeutic supports and family support services available to children and parents living in emergency accommodation.

Standards and inspection

- National implementation of the National Quality Standards Framework for Homeless Services in Ireland (NQSFI) needs to be progressed. In this regard, we welcome indications from the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government that the NQSFI will be introduced nationally over a 12-month period from 1 July 2019.
- To ensure appropriate monitoring, oversight and accountability, a mechanism for independent, statutory inspection of homelessness services needs to be put in place. I am concerned that there do not appear to be any plans to put in place a model of inspection of this kind.

Legislation

- Existing legislation needs to be amended and strengthened to make children visible and to require housing authorities to provide appropriate accommodation and supports to homeless families with children. In this regard, we would like to see detailed examination of the Housing (Homeless Families) Bill 2017 progress and further consideration to be given to approaches being taken in other jurisdictions to provide statutory safeguards for homeless families.
- The issue of enumerating the right to housing in the Constitution needs to be progressed as a matter of priority. It is very disappointing that the recommendations made in the eighth report of the Constitutional Convention on economic, social and cultural rights, which was completed in March 2014, have not been fully considered by the Oireachtas. We would like to see the Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach proceed with a detailed examination of the recommendations contained in this report without further delay.

I met the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government following the publication of 'No Place Like Home'. I have also written to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to ask her to give serious consideration to increasing the practical supports – including Child Support Workers and family support services – that are available to children and parents living in emergency accommodation, including Family Hubs.

To conclude, I am deeply concerned about the immediate and longer term impact that the trauma of homelessness has on children and their families – on their dignity, self-worth, wellbeing and rights. The damaging effects of homelessness on children underscore why the right to adequate housing, which is about "*the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity*", is a fundamental human right that we must ensure all children in Ireland can enjoy. I very much welcome, therefore, the Committee's decision to examine the impact of homelessness on children.

My renewed thanks to the Committee for inviting my Office to attend today. I am happy to take questions if I can be of further assistance.