

**Meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing,
Planning and Local Government
20 June 2018**

**Opening Statement of Eoghan Murphy, TD,
Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government**

Cathaoirleach, Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to appear again before the Committee, this time to discuss the very serious issue of homeless numbers and to update you on two important reports on homelessness which I published yesterday. These reports are prepared by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive and by the Inter-Agency Group on Homelessness, chaired by John Murphy, former Secretary General.

I am joined today by the following officials from my Department:

- Mary Hurley, Assistant Secretary, who has responsibility for Social Housing and Homelessness; and
- David Kelly, who has responsibility for our Homelessness and Housing Inclusion Supports Unit.

At the outset, I would like again to put on the record that tackling homelessness continues to be a top priority for the Government. I have always said that one family in emergency accommodation or one individual on the street is one too many and that remains my position.

Working with my Department and local authorities, you can be assured that every effort is being, and will continue to be, made to address this issue. The two reports that I have recently received will be carefully considered and any further policy responses that may be required will be brought forward in order to ensure that we are continuing to provide individuals and families with the supports they need.

Resources and funding are not an issue and I have told local authorities on many occasions, that all the required funding and resources of the State are available to them in terms of advancing new initiatives in response to homelessness in their local areas. I have emphasised the importance of being innovative in their responses to homelessness and in providing the most suitable and appropriate solutions and supports to those experiencing homelessness in their local areas.

In terms of progress to date, while we are seeing continued presentations of homeless families and individuals, it is important to note we are also seeing progress being made on the ground, including:

- The number of people sleeping rough has fallen dramatically. In April 2018, the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive undertook a count of rough sleepers and confirmed that the numbers of rough sleepers had reduced by over 40% from 184 in November 2017 to 110 in April 2018.
- Housing First is working, with a new National Director and a retention rate of almost 90%, so we are keeping people out of homelessness once we get them into a home.
- In 2017, 4,729 individuals exited homelessness, which is a 54% increase on the previous year.
- The numbers accommodated in hotels still remains below the high levels it was at in 2017. There are now 22 Family Hubs in place and these are the preferred first response.

- People are spending less time now in Emergency Accommodation than they were previously, mainly thanks to the new Family Hubs, with 45% of families in emergency accommodation exiting within six months.
- Through the dedicated efforts of exit teams, 2,080 families left hotels last year, the majority of them moving into homes rather than hubs.

Unfortunately, despite the number of exits from homelessness that we are achieving, the continuing number of presentations to homeless services means that the number of people in emergency accommodation remains unacceptably high. According to the April Homelessness Report, there were 5,963 adults in emergency accommodation, including 1,712 families with 3,689 of dependents.

At my request earlier this year, research was conducted and a comprehensive report was submitted last week by the DRHE and it is now available on my Department's website.

The report includes detailed information across a range of areas, including: reasons for family homelessness; prevention activities; citizenship of service users; the use of emergency accommodation; and exits from emergency accommodation.

I very much welcome the progress, outlined in the report, that the DRHE is making in relation to preventing households from becoming homeless. I think there is scope for us to do more in this area, particularly with the report referring to the number of individuals who are unwilling to consider a HAP supported tenancy in the private rental sector as a housing solution.

The report examines the reasons for family homelessness with the vast bulk of presentations relating either to family circumstances or issues with private rented accommodation. The data collected in relation to presentations arising from issues with private rented accommodation is not detailed enough for us to analyse the reasons in most cases, but where sufficient information is provided, the issues specified mainly relate to the sale of a property.

In relation to exits from emergency accommodation, the report noted that families will typically exit emergency accommodation within a quicker timeframe when residing in a family hub rather than a hotel or B&B. This emphasises the importance of the continued development of family hubs. While I would prefer not to have any families in emergency accommodation, it is clear that a hub provides a better temporary solution than a hotel. And with a hub it is only temporary.

The report identified that approximately 500 people with a range of medical conditions are currently being accommodated in emergency accommodation. For the majority of these individuals Housing First will not be the answer; their complex needs may require longer term supported accommodation.

The report outlines that 595 offers of social housing were made to households in emergency accommodation, with 81% of these offers accepted. The report also notes that families willing to avail of HAP were found to exit from homelessness much faster than families who exited through an offer of local authority or Approved Housing Body tenancies.

Details of the citizenship of services users have also been included in the report, with Irish Nationals accounting for 67% of users of emergency accommodation, other EU nationals accounting for 12% and non-EU nationals accounting for 21%.

A number of the issues identified in the DRHE report highlight areas where other arms of Government have a role to play and agencies such as the HSE and Tusla are very actively involved in the response to homelessness.

To ensure that the State's response to homelessness is effectively coordinated, I established the Homelessness Inter-Agency Group following the Housing Summit last September. The Group is chaired by John Murphy, former Secretary General in the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. The Group includes representation from my own Department, the Department of Health, the HSE, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, the Department of Justice and Equality, the CCMA, the DRHE, Tusla and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The Group recently submitted a report to me, setting out a number of recommendations to improve the State's response to homelessness. A number of recommendations relate to areas within my Department's remit. It is my intention to bring forward policy responses to address these recommendations within a short time-frame.

While there is much work that we can do prevent homelessness and to improve the experiences of those who become homeless, the real issue my Department is striving to address is the delivery of more houses.

We will continue to face a serious challenge with people presenting to our homeless services until significantly more homes are built both in the social and private housing areas. Rebuilding Ireland is a six year programme to bring our housing sector back to a stable state and we will see sustainable progress on the homeless front as new homes are delivered.

Last year alone saw over 26,000 additional households having their social housing need met, utilising a budget of €1.4 billion. In order to build on this progress and to meet the needs of further additional households, the budget has increased by 36% to €1.9 billion in 2018.

We must bear in mind – and it is clear from both reports – that for many people in emergency accommodation today, simply providing a home will not be the answer. People's needs are more complex, and we must be sensitive to their needs, and that requires more complex policy responses that take time to implement and will not always be successful in the first instance.

I look forward to engaging with Committee members today in relation to the two reports which have now been published.

ENDS