

## **Meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing,**

### **Planning and Local Government**

**03 October 2018**

#### **Opening Statement – Mary Hurley, Assistant Secretary, Social Housing, Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government**

I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to attend today's meeting in relation to the Housing (Homeless Families) Bill 2017, which seeks to impose an obligation on housing authorities to recognise the family unit and to have specific regard to the best interests of the children of homeless families, in crisis accommodation situations.

Today, I am accompanied by my colleague David Kelly, Principal Officer, with responsibility for the Homelessness and Housing Inclusion Supports area of the Department.

I welcome the opportunity to outline today the existing provisions under the Housing Acts, in relation to the welfare of children and families, who are experiencing homelessness and I also welcome the opportunity to



update you on the Department's work in terms of supporting families, who are experiencing homelessness.

The existing provisions of the 1988 Housing Act already set out the requirements for a person, or household, to be regarded as homeless by a housing authority for the purposes of the Act. Under the provisions, it is a matter for the housing authority concerned to determine whether a person is regarded as homeless. In the case of any person determined to be homeless, the housing authority seeks to put in place the most appropriate immediate accommodation response, which the housing authority may arrange itself or which may be operated by a State-funded service provider, without the requirement to undergo a social housing assessment and be approved for social housing supports.

The existing system has generally provided for the emergency accommodation needs of homeless families with children at a time when significant numbers of families have been presenting to services. Indeed, the current homeless assessment arrangements give housing authorities the flexibility that is essential to respond quickly and effectively to the varied needs of the individuals and families that present to them and authorities make every reasonable effort to address their accommodation needs. While every case that presents to homeless



services is different, housing authorities always endeavour to ensure that the response they provide is the most appropriate to the particular circumstances of each case.

As I have set out, statutory responsibility in relation to the provision of homeless accommodation and related services rests with individual local authorities. The Department's role involves the provision of a national framework of policy, legislation and funding to underpin the role of local authorities in addressing homelessness at local level.

Funding is provided to local authorities on a regional basis. Regional allocations are delegated to a lead-authority in each of the nine local authority regions and under these arrangements responsibility for assessment and decision-making in relation to the funding of services rests with the relevant regional lead authorities. These allocations are made and overseen in accordance with protocols agreed between the Department and the lead local authorities.

With the increase in homelessness in recent years, the Government has increased the funding available to the Department for the provision of



homeless services. In 2018, the Government provided Exchequer funding of €116m for the provision of homeless services, an 18% increase on the 2017 budget allocation. This funding is allocated to local authorities to fund the operational costs of providing homeless services. Under the statutory arrangements in place, the local authorities are required to fund a minimum of 10% of the operational costs from their own resources. A significant proportion of this funding relates to the provision of accommodation for families experiencing homelessness, including in hotels, and increasingly in family hubs.

Rebuilding Ireland, the Government's Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness, includes a range of measures to support families experiencing homelessness.

The Plan recognises that hotels are not a suitable or secure medium to long-term accommodation option for families. In 2017, the Department began working with the local authorities on the development of family hubs in a number of areas.



Family hubs provide a more appropriate short-term solution for accommodating families who are experiencing homelessness, by providing cooking and laundry facilities, along with greater space for recreational activities, as well as other family-centred supports. Families in hubs are supported by the local authorities to identify and secure independent tenancies.

There are currently 22 family hubs in operation providing approximately 550 units of family accommodation. The Department is working with the local authorities to deliver further family hubs and is making available the necessary capital funding for this. In this regard, Minister Murphy recently wrote to local authorities requesting that they bring forward and accelerate, as a matter of urgency, additional family hubs.

The Department is also working closely with the local authorities on the Homeless HAP placefinders programme. This programme was made available to all local authorities earlier this year and the Department has approved funding for 22 placefinder officers in local authorities nationally. The placefinder officers work with families experiencing homelessness to identify a tenancy in the private rented sector and can



provide financial supports by way of the rental deposit and advance rental payments.

Supporting families experiencing homelessness is a priority for the Department. We work closely with our counterparts in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla. This includes working together on the Inter-Agency Group, established by Minister Murphy in 2017, to ensure that the State's response to homelessness is coordinated effectively.

Minister Murphy, only last week at this Committee, reaffirmed his commitment and priority to tackling homelessness. While significant numbers of families and individuals continue to present as homeless, record levels of individuals and families are being supported out of homelessness, with 4,729 adults exiting homelessness into independent tenancies in 2017 and a further 2,332 in the first half of 2018.

Finally, I would like to assure the Committee that the Department, with its local authority colleagues, will continue to work and support families and other households experiencing homelessness, with a view to



ensuring that they can secure long-term sustainable housing solutions, as quickly as possible.

My colleague David Kelly and I are happy to answer any questions that you have on this matter.