



**Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government
Opening Presentation by the Ombudsman for Children, Dr Niall Muldoon
Wednesday, 12 June 2019**

I would like to thank the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government for inviting me to appear today to discuss the issue of child and family homelessness.

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.

I would like to take the opportunity presented by today's meeting to highlight to the Committee issues and recommendations contained in a report by my Office called 'No Place Like Home'. We published this report in April 2019 and its main purpose is to highlight the views and experiences of children living in Family Hubs.

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 and an initial pilot phase and there is also no clear public policy objectives for their use. As the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government indicated in his update on Rebuilding Ireland to this Committee on 29 May, there are currently 27 Family Hubs in operation nationally, providing 650 units of accommodation and further Hubs are being developed.

In light of how Family Hubs emerged and are being developed further, we wanted to learn more about what it is like for children to live in Family Hubs. Needless to say, this focus is not to distract or detract in any way from the very challenging circumstances faced by:

- families who are being provided with emergency accommodation in hotels and B&Bs
- families who are required to self-accommodate by finding their own emergency accommodation in a hotel or B&B
- families who are experiencing 'hidden homelessness'.

The consultation that we undertook between October 2018 and January 2019 involved engaging directly 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.

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. Younger children who had access to outdoor play space and equipment where they could play with other children identified this as a positive feature. Similarly, 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 and the food. Where facilities such as computers, a TV room and/or study room were provided, older children identified these as positives. Some older children identified living in a Family Hub as comparatively better to where they had been previously – for example, as being less crowded than living with extended family in overcrowded housing 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 and helpfulness 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, notwithstanding the efforts and kindness of staff working in the Hubs. In brief, 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. Compounding these challenges are the feelings of shame that children expressed about being homeless and the feelings of failure that parents expressed about being in this situation with their children.

As regards changes that could improve Family Hubs, children and parents spoke about needing more and better space – for example, providing more than one room for family members to sleep in, providing more than one communal area for families to use, providing a separate study space for children, providing space for families to meet with visitors, and providing outdoor play space in Family Hubs that do not already have this. They also spoke about the need for better facilities, including cooking facilities, and about reducing rules and restrictions in so far as it is possible to do so. Several older children spoke about the need to combat the stigma associated with family homelessness while a number of parents expressed the view that regular reviews of Family Hubs need to be undertaken. The recommendation that was made most frequently, however, was that families should have long-term, secure housing and receive all the support they need to access it. As one parent observed: *"If you change small things, the bigger problems are still there. This is emergency accommodation, the emergency is the problem"*.

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 for action 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 (NQSF) needs to be progressed. In this regard, we welcome indications from the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government that the NQSF will be introduced nationally over a 12-month period from 1 July 2019.
- In order to ensure appropriate monitoring, oversight and accountability, a mechanism for independent, statutory inspection of homelessness services needs to be put in place. We are concerned that there do not appear to be any plans to put in place a model of inspection of this kind.

Data

- Prompt progress needs to be made as regards developing and implementing improved practices in data collection and disaggregation concerning homelessness among families with children. This is vital to providing for an evidence-informed approach to legislation, public policy and provision in this area.

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. In 2017, the Dáil and Seanad passed a motion to refer this report to the Oireachtas Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach. We would like this Committee to proceed with a detailed examination of the recommendations contained in this report without further delay.

I am pleased to inform the Committee that, following the publication of 'No Place Like Home', I had a constructive meeting with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government in May. I look forward to engaging further with the Minister and his Department, including about the proposed evaluation of Family Hubs.

In light of the roles that the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla (Child and Family Agency) have under Rebuilding Ireland with regard to supporting families experiencing homelessness, 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, my Office fully appreciates that the crisis in family homelessness in Ireland is multi-faceted and complex and that Family Hubs are one aspect of the current response to it. I hope that our 'No Place Like Home' report is a constructive contribution and I can assure the Committee that we will build on it over the coming years.

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.