

Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government on the issue of child and family homelessness

12 June 2019



Founded in 1995, the Children's Rights Alliance unites over 100 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services.

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Ag Eisteacht
Alcohol Action Ireland
Amnesty International Ireland
An Cosán
ASH Ireland
Assoc. for Criminal Justice Research and Development (ACJRD)
Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI)
ATD Fourth World – Ireland Ltd
Atheist Ireland
Autism Network Ireland
Barnardos
Barretstown Camp
Bedford Row Family Project
BeLonG To Youth Services
Care Leavers' Network
Catholic Guides of Ireland
Child Care Law Reporting Project
Childhood Development Initiative
Children in Hospital Ireland
COPE Galway
Cork Life Centre
Crosscare
Cybersafe
Dental Health Foundation of Ireland
Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, UCC
Disability Federation of Ireland
Down Syndrome Ireland
Dublin Rape Crisis Centre
Early Childhood Ireland
Educate Together
EPIC
Extern Ireland
Focus Ireland
Foróige
Future Voices Ireland
Gaelscoileanna Teo
Good Shepherd Cork
Home-Start National Office
Immigrant Council of Ireland
Inclusion Ireland
Independent Hospitals Association of Ireland
Institute of Guidance Counsellors
Irish Aftercare Network
Irish Association for Infant Mental Health
Irish Association of Social Workers
Irish Centre for Human Rights, NUI Galway
Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)
Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL)
Irish Foster Care Association
Irish Girl Guides
Irish Heart Foundation
Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)
Irish Penal Reform Trust
Irish Primary Principals Network
Irish Refugee Council
Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU)
Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
Irish Traveller Movement
Irish Youth Foundation (IYF)
Jack & Jill Children's Foundation
Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice
Jigsaw
Kids' Own Publishing Partnership
Lifestart National Office
Mecpaths
Mental Health Reform
Mercy Law Resource Centre
Migrant Rights Centre Ireland
Mothers' Union
Mounttown Neighbourhood Youth and Family Project
Museum of Childhood Project
MyMind
National Childhood Network
National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers (NOTA)
National Parents Council Post Primary
National Parents Council Primary
National Youth Council of Ireland
Novas
One Family
One in Four
Parentstop
Pavee Point
Peter McVerry Trust
Rainbows Ireland
Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI)
Realt Beag
Respond Housing
SAFE Ireland
Saoirse Housing Association
SAOL Beag Children's Centre
Scouting Ireland
School of Education UCD
Sexual Violence Centre Cork
Simon Communities of Ireland
Social Care Ireland
Society of St. Vincent de Paul
Sonas Domestic Violence Charity
Special Needs Parents Association
SPHE Network
SpunOut.ie
St. Nicholas Montessori College
St. Nicholas Montessori Teachers' Association
St. Patrick's Mental Health Services
Step by Step Child & Family Project
Suas Educational Development
Teachers' Union of Ireland
Terenure Rugby Football Club
The Ark, A Cultural Centre for Children
The Prevention and Early Intervention Network
The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway
Traveller Visibility Group Ltd
Treoir
UNICEF Ireland
youngballymun
Youth Advocate Programme Ireland (YAP)
Youth Work Ireland

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Opening Statement

The Children’s Rights Alliance welcomes today’s opportunity to address the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government on the child and family homelessness crisis. The Alliance unites over 100 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children by making sure their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services. We also provide legal information and advice to children, young people and their families through our legal information line and nationwide legal advice outreach clinics.

According to the latest figures almost 4,000 children are living in unsuitable emergency accommodation, including B&Bs and hotels.ⁱ From 2015 to 2019, children under 18 experienced the steepest rise in homelessness of any age groupⁱⁱ with children under four making up the largest cohort living in emergency accommodation.ⁱⁱⁱ Home should be a warm, secure and safe place for all children. However, we are in the middle of a housing crisis with record levels of children and their families experiencing homelessness due to a lack of proper social housing and the reliance on an overstretched private rented sector.

Outside Dublin, the problem has also increased with 445 families with 1,025 children in emergency accommodation in April 2019.^{iv} Young parents aged 18 to 24 years make up 20 to 25 per cent of families in Dublin experiencing homelessness; almost one in ten parents moved straight from their family home of origin into emergency accommodation with their children.^v Many other families stay in overcrowded situations with family and friends to avoid this but are not counted in the homeless statistics.

Report Card is our tool to identify serious issues for children. It scrutinises the Government’s own commitments to children flowing from its programme for government. This year we awarded the Government an ‘F’ – or a FAIL – for ‘Child and Family Homelessness’. This is due to the ongoing homelessness crisis and the failure of Government to reduce the number of children living in emergency homeless accommodation.

Homelessness has a devastating impact on children. When children experience homelessness their basic needs for nutrition, adequate rest and good health are negatively impacted. Homelessness has a particularly detrimental impact on a child’s education as they frequently miss school sometimes due to poor diet, inadequate rest and poor living conditions.^{vi} Living in emergency accommodation impacts both their physical and mental health. Infections, including chicken pox, ear infections and head lice – are common in overcrowded and confined accommodation.^{vii}

We know from our Home Works report which examined the educational needs of children experiencing homelessness, launched a year ago, children and young people also experience anxiety, low self-esteem and feelings of social isolation. Scarce financial resources, long journeys to and from school, significant transport costs, lack of appropriate facilities for food preparation and storage, and inadequate facilities for sleep and maintaining personal hygiene result in irritability and exhaustion. Many children are embarrassed to tell their friends about their situation so they become withdrawn and friendships break down. Others are frustrated that they cannot have normal everyday experiences like play dates or sleepovers. However, school provides them with stability and teachers on the front line are doing a sterling job at supporting children and young people with scant resources.

There is no one reason why families with children become homeless but high rents, lack of security of tenure and overall lack of housing supply, particularly properties falling within stated rent limits for the purposes of Rent Supplement or Housing Assistance Payment (HAP),^{viii} have fuelled the

housing crisis. In 2018, over half of families presenting to homeless services in Dublin cited ‘a loss of or inability to secure private rented accommodation’ as the reason.^{ix}

While there is currently no constitutional right to housing, Ireland is party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This gives every child the right to an adequate standard of living for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development – including the provision of housing.^x However, the Convention does not apply directly in Irish law and it is up to the Courts to determine how much weight it gives international law in its decisions. In 2016, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concerns at ‘reports of families affected by homelessness facing significant delays in accessing social housing and frequently living in inappropriate, temporary or emergency accommodation on a long-term basis’.^{xi} Children as a priority group must be ‘accorded full and sustainable access to adequate housing resources’.^{xii} The UN Committee called on the Irish State to undertake measures to increase the availability of social housing and emergency housing support.^{xiii}

The face of homelessness in Ireland has changed. Existing legislation was drafted with homeless adult men in mind, because that was the homeless demographic at that time yet lone parent families with children now represent the biggest cohort in the homeless population.^{xiv} Right now, when local authorities decide where children will be accommodated, they do not have to take their best interests into account. A change to the law would mean that decision-makers have to consider what is best for each child and try to ensure that their needs are met. They would also have to consult with the child or young person on the decision.

The Government committed in *Rebuilding Ireland* – its Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness – to use ‘emergency hotel and B&B type accommodation for families’ only ‘in limited circumstances’ by mid-2017. It did not meet this target and instead in July 2017, it began to roll-out family supported accommodation facilities or ‘family hubs’. The idea was to transition families out of unsuitable emergency hotel and B&B accommodation. While the hubs are more suitable, they do not represent a long-term or child-appropriate solution. At the beginning of 2019, there were 26 hubs nationwide with capacity to accommodate 600 families.^{xv}

Some families spend years in emergency accommodation; at the end of March 2019, 13 per cent had been there for more than two years.^{xvi} No official statistics on the length of stay in family hubs exists but the Government has acknowledged that it may not reach the six-month target depending on a family’s requirements or preferences.^{xvii} Both the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission^{xviii} and the Ombudsman for Children^{xix} have called for time limits on how long a family should spend in hubs. The OCO’s recent report, *No Place Like Home* is essential reading as children and young people share their experiences of living in family hubs in their own words. It is clear that children themselves do not consider family hubs to be the solution to the housing crisis. To avoid the risk of institutionalisation and the ‘normalisation’ of homelessness, families should not spend longer than six months in hubs before being re-housed.

As part of our No Child 2020 campaign, the Children’s Rights Alliance is calling on the Government to legislate to ensure that decisions about where to accommodate a child are made considering what is best for them and their family. This could mean thinking about things like whether the accommodation is near a child’s school, how long they might have to travel to get there or whether the accommodation has enough space for a baby to crawl and learn to walk. The legislation should clearly time-limit the use of emergency accommodation for families with children.

In the longer-term we are calling on the Government to redirect investment away from short-term solutions like family hubs and into long-term public housing. Housing should be provided by local authorities, voluntary housing bodies or other not-for-profit entities. We would hope to see a move away from a reliance on the private rented sector to provide families with suitable, adequate and affordable housing and they will have security of tenure in their home. The right to housing should be enshrined in the Constitution as recommended by the Constitutional Convention in 2014.^{xx}

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- i Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 'Homelessness Report April 2019' <<https://bit.ly/2MgNWMd>> accessed 6 June 2019.
 - ii Focus Ireland, 'Latest Figures on Homelessness on Ireland' <<https://bit.ly/2s9Sdma>> accessed 6 June 2019.
 - iii Government of Ireland, Census of Population 2016 – Profile 5 Homeless Persons in Ireland <<https://bit.ly/2vBWNgg>> accessed 6 June 2019.
 - iv Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 'Homelessness Report April 2019' <<https://bit.ly/2MgNWMd>> accessed 6 June 2019.
 - v Dr Sharon Lambert, Daniel O'Callaghan and Owen Jump, Young Families in the Homeless Crisis: Challenges and Solutions, (Focus Ireland 2018) 1.
 - vi Dr Geraldine Scanlon and Grainne McKenna, Home Works: Study on Educational Needs of Children in Homelessness (Children's Rights Alliance 2018).
 - vii *ibid.*
 - viii Simon Communities in Ireland, *Locked Out of the Market XII: The Gap between Rent Supplement/HAP and Market Rents*, (Simon Communities in Ireland 2018).
 - ix Dublin Region Homeless Executive, *DRHE Quarterly Activity Report* (DRHE 2018) 6.
 - x UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 27.
 - xi UNCRC 'Concluding Observations: Ireland' (2016) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4 para 61.
 - xii UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 'General Comment No. 4 on the Right to Adequate Housing (Art 11(1) of the Covenant)' (1991) UN Doc E/1992/23 para 8(e).
 - xiii UNCRC 'Concluding Observations: Ireland' (2016) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4 para 62.
 - xiv Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 'Homelessness Report April 2019' <<https://bit.ly/2MgNWMd>> accessed 6 June 2019.
 - xv Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 8 January 2019.
 - xvi Focus Ireland, 'Latest Figures on Homelessness on Ireland' <<https://bit.ly/2s9Sdma>> accessed 6 June 2019.
 - xvii Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 8 January 2019.
 - xviii Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, The provision of emergency accommodation to families experiencing homelessness (IHREC 2017) 12.
 - xix Ombudsman for Children's Office, *No Place Like Home* (OCO 2019) 27.
 - xx The Convention on the Constitution, ESC Rights, (The Convention on the Constitution 2014) <<https://bit.ly/2Xrnosp>> accessed 18 April 2019.