

Presentation to Joint Committee on Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government meeting
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Investing in the Right to a Home: Social Housing, HAPs and HUBS

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Thank you for the invitation to attend the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government meeting on 20th September 2017 and the opportunity to stress the urgent need for the state to take responsibility for the practical delivery of social housing in Ireland.

Our research was conducted in the context of a larger European Union H2020 funded research project Re-InVest¹. It focuses on the structural crisis of family homelessness in Ireland, a direct outcome of long-term disinvestment in social housing, privatization, marketization and financialisation of social and private housing. Using human rights, capability theoretical frameworks, and a participatory approach we examined three key themes: Rebuilding Ireland's over reliance on the private rental sector to resolve the social housing deficit and homelessness crisis; the effectiveness of the private rental subsidy, Housing Assistance Payment (HAP); the emergence of family hubs (hubs) as emergency accommodation for homeless families.

Sadly, our argument that homelessness will escalate has already been proven. We highlight for your attention five strategies; prevention, building homes, enhancing HAP, mitigating the potential negative impacts of hubs, and addressing power imbalances through a rights approach, all of which are premised by the urgent need to act now.

Prevention and early intervention are cost-effective policies for confronting homelessness; reintegration costs increase sharply after somebody has become homeless and cost benefit analysis shows significant returns on investment in preventative measures. Amongst the many innovative ways to prevent, homelessness is to improve security for private sector tenants and to introduce mechanisms to prevent homeless arising in the context of likely acceleration of repossessions of buy to lets and owner occupied homes such as the proposal for a National Housing Co-operative/National Building Agency.

Such is the scale of the homelessness crisis that our research, launched in July 2017, is already out of date. The number of children homeless increased by over 30% since the 2016 publication of Rebuilding Ireland. We find a core tension in trying to address the social housing crisis by over-relying on the private market to deliver investment in housing while disinvesting in social housing build. The net effect negates the housing rights of the most vulnerable in Ireland. Early signals in the review of Rebuilding Ireland reflect a core conclusion of our research; the primary mechanism to resolve social housing and homelessness has to be state-led provision of social housing by local authorities. While we welcome Minister Eoghan Murphy's comment on the need to revert to state, led building of social houses we remain to be convinced that the cognitive lock that afford primacy to the market has been broken and note with concern the disproportionate power and presence of financial speculators in the Irish housing market. Tempering the power of the private housing market

¹ www.re-invest.eu

requires ideological and practical mind-shifts underpinned by a legislative approach to housing rights. We need nothing less than an emergency state building programme. If the Irish state could build 9,000 social houses in 1975 that, they can do so in 2018

Housing rights have been diminished over time as policy shifted from traditional social housing building programmes to the greater use of rental subsidies with first the Rent Supplement (RS), then Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) and finally the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). Rebuilding Ireland's had a serious fault-line in its use of HAP as the primary mechanism to meet social housing need. This not only fails to provide the security of tenure associated with the right to housing but means vulnerable homeless families are set up to fail as they have to cope with the impact of both aggressive competition and discrimination in the context of a very tight private rental market. Until the Private Rental Tenancies act is amended to offers effective security of tenure we argue HAP cannot ensure the right to housing. In addition, from a cost perspective, direct build social housing presents a far greater return on state investment.

Proof that both the private market and HAP are failing to realise social housing needs and rights is found in the reality of life in emergency homeless accommodation and the emerging Family Hubs. Using a capability framework we find these hotels and hubs restrict the capacity to live normal family lives and curtail functioning in parenting, child development, education, employment and maintenance of family and social networks, with devastating impacts on family, adult and child well-being. We find no international research or evidence base to justify the emerging family hubs model and note there have been no pilots or operational guidelines to demonstrate how they might work.

We argue the danger with 'hubs' is that they can work as a form of 'therapeutic incarceration' both institutionalising and reducing the functioning capacity of families. We have a long Irish history of gendered forms of social violence inflicted on poor mothers and their children who were made invisible, incarcerated and excluded from society. We caution that hubs may be a new form of institutionalisation of vulnerable women and children, and poor families (predominantly lone parent mothers, working class, migrant and ethnic minority women). Housing market failures will be forgotten as these families become the 'problem' that needs to be solved. While stressing the need for an urgent social housing building programme we argue short term stays in emergency accommodation hubs need to maximise family functioning, dignity and respect. Such institutional responses to homelessness should be avoided, if used design and operational models should mitigate the worst damage by prioritising autonomy, quality standards and time limits on residence, as well as a legislative 'sunset' clause on the use of Family Hubs.

Power inequalities dominate housing policy. Powerful vested interests, domestic, and increasingly international, profit from maintaining the dominant position of the market and conservative interpretations of the right to property in the 1937 Irish constitution. A powerful political and media metanarrative makes the market seem an inevitable and natural presence in social housing provision. The same metanarrative injects elements of morality into public discourse where those who cannot access housing are made bear the blame for market and policy failure. The Economic and Social Rights campaign successfully brought their case for a constitutional right to housing through the 2015 Constitutional Convention. A rights approach to housing would lead to practical policy changes, for example adequate systems for service user's participation and consultation and for redress and safe-guarding entitlements, but it would also shift power, create an alternative public narrative and a focus for policy change.

This housing crisis will continue for many years to come. Given the on-going mortgage arrears crisis, the private rental crisis, and the lack of private supply, HAP, even with reconfiguration, is unlikely to provide a stable and secure home for these families and families in hubs remain inadequately housed and exposed to institutionalisation. Hidden away, their homeless may be forgotten and ignored. We need political will to address this very real crisis and to implement a real emergency response, a state led building programme.

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