

Threshold’s Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage – Homelessness Update

30th May 2023

Chairperson, members of the Committee, we would like to sincerely thank you for inviting us to speak to you today. I am joined by Ann-Marie O’Reilly, Threshold’s National Advocacy Manager.

Threshold is a national charity which provides a Tenancy Protection Service, focussing on advice and homeless prevention. Our specialism is the private rental sector and the Residential Tenancies Acts. Threshold has been supporting renters since 1978 and approximately 20,000 private renters avail of Threshold’s assistance each year. Since 2014, when we began to see significant increases in rent and a similar rise in the number of people entering homelessness from the private rental sector, Threshold has been at the forefront in keeping people in their homes or ensuring they have the advice they need regarding their tenancy.

Today, I will set out the trends we are seeing on the ground, the challenges faced in preventing homelessness and possible solutions to reducing and ending homelessness.

Trends

Since 2022, we have seen an increase in the number of people who are at risk of homelessness, who are forced to into hidden homelessness, who are overholding, as well as an increase in the amount of time we spend working with clients.

To place this in context, in Q1 of 2022 we worked with 5,360 households who were at risk of homelessness. In Q1 of this year we worked with 6,001 who were at risk - a 12% increase.

We identified 475 of our clients who were overholding in Q1 2023, compared to 303 in Q1 2022 - an increase of 57%.

We have also seen an increase in the number of people experiencing “hidden homelessness”. In Q1 of this year, 68 households were force to “couchsurf”, staying with family and friends, in what they hope is a temporary set up while searching for a new home. There were 58 households in this situation in quarter 1 of 2022 but in the same quarter in 2020 there were just five.

In the first quarter of this year, 104 households we worked with entered homelessness. The figure for the same period in 2022 was 98 – a similar number.

Challenges

These few headline figures illustrate how it is becoming increasingly difficult to prevent people from losing their home or for people to find a new home. This is primarily due to the large increase in the number of landlords who are choosing to sell their rental property. In 2022, 83% of our clients who entered homelessness had received a notice of termination from their landlord. This is compounded by the lack of alternative housing options.

We see that families are more likely to enter homelessness than other household types, with one-parent families at significantly greater risk, as are those receiving a social welfare payment and reliant on HAP. These households often need additional support and guidance to ensure homelessness is prevented, including representation at the RTB.

We also saw a high proportion of our single clients enter homelessness in 2022. This points to the decreasing availability of housing options, as previously single people were able to access housing that families could not. This was due to a number of factors; less restrictions regarding location as they do not face the considerations of childcare and schools, they are more mobile, and they do not have the same space requirements as families.

Solutions

It will take a range of solutions over the short, medium and long-term to end homelessness and resolve the housing crisis. While the Government has taken significant measures, particularly in recent months, the situation has deteriorated significantly in a few short years.

While we are seeing a recent sustained increase in housing provision, we are also witnessing the fallout from historic undersupply, the over reliance on the private rental sector to provide housing and a lack of planning to ensure the sector could provide long-term homes for people across the lifecycle.

We commend the Government's efforts in respect of the Tenant-in-Situ and Cost-Rental Tenant-in-Situ schemes and can see these having a positive impact for hundreds of households around the country. The additional 1,300 permitted Local Authority acquisitions, to support the scheme, is significant. However, Threshold

has been contacted by over 1,200 private renters with a valid notice of termination, so far this year. At present, we are assisting over 2,500 households who have a valid

notice of termination. We need far more than 1,300 units to be purchased under this scheme.

We recommend that both these Tenant in Situ programmes become central features of housing delivery. This needs to be part of a long-term shift away from a reliance on the private rental sector toward a more sustainable housing model.

The availability of the First Home Scheme to renters is positive. It is however, too early to determine the impact this will have, particularly as we await the accompanying legislation.

We recognise the time required to deliver new housing and understand there are growing numbers in the pipeline. This is why it is also necessary to focus on the housing that can be provided in the short- to medium- term. This means that both central and local government need to become more ambitious and creative in the delivery of housing.

The Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant, alongside the Ready to Build Scheme, has a target of only 2,000 homes by 2025. Under the Repair and Lease Scheme, only 101 homes were provided in 2022. Figures indicate that only 244 were acquired under CAS, which funds the Buy and Renew Scheme. Given the scale of the challenge these numbers are insufficient.

We understand that Government may be considering measures to retain landlords in the sector such as reduced tax on rental income. If this is undertaken, then we stress the absolute need to tie this reduction to increased security of tenure for tenants. A blanket reduction in tax will not guarantee against landlords leaving the sector, or ensure increased security of tenure, but will come at great expense to the State.

There have been reports of consideration being given to allow landlords to increase rents between tenancies when a tenant leaves of their own accord. We caution against this as it may dissuade landlords from renting to older people and those who are looking for a long-term home. Essentially, such a measure would incentivise discrimination and certain landlords to 'encourage' tenants to end their own tenancies.

We thank you for your time. We are happy to answer any questions you may have on our presentation and indeed on the work of Threshold.