

CORK CITY COUNCIL'S OPENING STATEMENT TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE DEVELOPMENT IN HOMELESSNESS PROVISION SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF THE COMMITTEE'S REPORT

5TH MARCH 2024

Introduction

Chair, and members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to attend the Joint Committee on developments in homelessness provision since the publication of the Committee's report in 2021.

Attending the Committee meeting today is Brian Geaney, Deputy Chief Executive of Cork City Council, Niall Ó Donnabháin, Director of Housing Operations, Cork City Council, Nicky Carroll, Senior Executive Officer, Housing Operations and Aileen O'Brien, Administrative Officer, Cork City Council. We welcome the opportunity to update the Committee on the progress made by Cork City Council in the delivery and development of services for homelessness in Cork.

Overview

Considerable measures have been taken to facilitate families and individuals experiencing homelessness in Cork City. In 2019, Cork City Council took over the management of the Homeless Persons Unit from the Department of Social Protection. The strategy from the outset was to put in place a centralised standalone office for the service creating an easily accessible space in a city centre location providing for confidentiality and privacy for service users. Renamed the Accommodation Placement Service (APS) it provides Emergency Accommodation and advice and advocacy to homeless individuals and families and specialist staff provide a streamlined holistic homeless service including a host of wrap-around services for the city placing a significant focus on prevention.

Continual engagement and work with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the NGO sector and critical government agencies by way of weekly, fortnightly, and monthly meetings such as the Homeless Action Team, the Local Homeless Forum, Regional Consultative Forum ensures core services are delivered to the most vulnerable individuals. The homeless office in conjunction with local stakeholders through the Regional Consultative Forum are currently reviewing and drafting the Regional Homeless Action Plan which will be finalised in Q2, 2024. This plan will be evidence based, creating a robust operational framework aimed at meeting current needs and future requirements.

Cork City Council operates with a trauma-informed approach to service delivery with a focus on harm reduction and a recovery orientation and is closely aligned with the HSE Cork Kerry Social Inclusion Team along with the key homeless service providers in the city. Staff are continually supported in their roles and the promotion of staff wellbeing, and the enhancement of skillsets are facilitated.

Housing Delivery

Cork City Council, with the continued support of Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and in partnership with the AHB sector has focused significant effort and resources to substantially increase the level of social housing supply across the city in the last number of years utilising key initiatives such as Competitive Dialogue to create a robust pipeline of new housing units. This uplift and sustained increase in supply provides significant opportunities to tackle the wider homeless challenge. Between 2016 – 2022 Cork City Council delivered 3,145 new social homes across Cork City and the City Council is on track to exceed the 2022 – 2026 target of 3,934 new homes. As part of this Housing Action Plan, key programmes such as Repair and Lease are being utilised to good effect helping deliver high quality 1 and 2 bed units in the city centre for those exiting or being prevented from entering homelessness. 12 units have been delivered under this programme to date with an expected delivery of 25 in 2024.

Exits and Preventions from Homelessness.

While a significant proportion of all housing allocations in Cork City, i.e. 23% in 2023 were to homeless families and individuals Cork City Council is acutely aware of the need to limit the use of Emergency Accommodation and that same should be for emergencies primarily and short-term in nature. While 145 families were placed in Emergency Accommodation in 2023, at the end of January 2024, 55 families were accommodated in an Emergency Accommodation setting in the city proving that the City's focus on preventions and exits to longer term and more suitable accommodation is crucial to limiting this reliance.

Over the last six years families experiencing homelessness in Cork City have seen a reduction of 44%. While there are currently 55 families in Emergency Accommodation, a total 184 households exited Emergency Accommodation in 2023. The projected target for Q1, 2024 for households exiting Emergency Accommodation is 80, up from 25 for the same quarter last year. The Council will continue to focus its efforts to reduce homeless family numbers throughout 2024.

Cork City Council has prevented a total of 264 households from entering homelessness in 2023. This represents a 156% increase in preventions on the previous year. This was achieved due to homeless preventions via increased housing allocations, the roll out of the Tenant in Situ (TIS) scheme along with homeless HAP.

129 TIS acquisitions have been secured since the programme commenced in April 2023 and this has been of significant assistance in helping prevent homelessness across the city. The Accommodation Placement Service (APS) has received a total of 158 compliant Notices of Terminations (NOTS) in 2023, with a further 42 received to date in 2024 which account for NOTs out to the end of the year.

While the number of single individuals in Cork has increased year on year since 2020, that number has stabilised in the last 12 months. The number of single individuals in homeless services at the end of 2023 was 399. Single individuals often face additional challenges when securing an exit from homelessness given the limited supply of 1-bed properties, availability of rental properties and in some cases the complexities involved, and the level of support required to effectively sustain tenancies. The expansion and further development of the Housing First programme has been of significant assistance in tackling rough sleeper numbers in the city and other existing support settings such as our youth homeless facilities in Cork Foyer, Bishopsgrove and Wellsprings provide an invaluable service to these vulnerable cohorts.

Cork City Council currently has 41 Housing First tenancies in place. The service is delivered by Cork City Council, Focus Ireland, Cork Simon Community, and the Health Service Executive (HSE). The service was established in April 2019 and since the inception of the 2022 Implementation Plan, with a target of 45 tenancies between 2022 - 2026, Cork City has been exceeding its targets each year. Cork City Council, in partnership with the AHBs involved, has a target of 10 properties for delivery in 2024 and this target will be achieved.

Services available via Approved Housing Bodies and the introduction of further Transitional Accommodation in 2023 will continue to support these key groups to exit from Emergency Accommodation successfully. There are a total of seven Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) providing Transitional Accommodation in Cork, which accounts for 132 beds of this type in the city. Cork City Council acknowledges that we cannot solve this problem alone, therefore collaborations with approved housing bodies in Cork are critical in our response.

This type of accommodation is crucial in providing a stepping stone for individuals exiting homelessness and minimises or eliminates their stay in Emergency Accommodation by offering pathways to appropriate housing. Cork City Council successfully piloted and tendered for a Transitional Accommodation project in 2023 directly exiting 7 families and 2 single households from Emergency Accommodation in 2023 that did require tenancy sustainment. Cork City Council is looking to explore further expansion of this type of supported accommodation through 2024 and is confident that this will assist in achieving a positive and appreciable reduction in homelessness among families and single adults in Cork City.

Outreach Services

Outreach services are in place in Cork City, provided by Cork Simon Community with statutory funding from the Cork Local Drugs and Alcohol Task Force via the HSE, and working in partnership with Cork City Council. Outreach is conducted Monday to Friday in the city and the team is available for emergencies throughout the week.

Residents in Emergency Accommodation are assigned a Case Worker in line with Cork Simon Community, De Paul, and Good Shepherd's case management model whose role is to work with everyone to assess needs, develop and review Care / Recovery / Support Plans, and partner with the individual. This addresses a range of conditions, including housing, health, addiction, education, training, employment, finances, living skills, family, social network etc., with each person. The assigned caseworker also makes referrals and brokers other services as required.

The Outreach service is currently expanding with a further four support workers due to be in place before the end of Q1 2024. This will help ensure that further intensive support is available in Cork City where required.

Key Planned Homeless Projects

A review and analysis of homeless families and individuals in the city highlights the need, where appropriate, to tailor and deliver bespoke homeless projects. While the uplift in social housing delivery and the focus on exits and preventions to homelessness is key, there are groups where multi stakeholder engagement on key projects and initiatives is required to provide a long-term sustainable accommodation solution. In that context Cork City Council, working closely with the NGO sector and key government agencies and bodies, intends to support and bring forward key homeless projects from 2024 onwards:

- Using innovative modular construction Cork City Council is looking to develop a new form of Transitional Accommodation to help address the growing issue of youth homelessness in the city in line with the current Youth Homelessness Strategy. This project would create a pathway for youths currently within Emergency Accommodation to transfer to specialist accommodation based on current needs and help address this growing vulnerable homeless cohort.
- Reimagining a vacant institutional building of heritage value in the city centre, Cork City Council is supporting the development, by Good Shepherd Services, of a purpose-built Domestic Violence Centre of appropriate scale. This is set for delivery in 2025/2026. Given the unfortunate but growing requirement a larger facility is required to meet the needs of this vulnerable cohort who require specialist support.
- A long-term residential accommodation (LTA) service for individuals with high dependency and a high level of physical health issues and who are unlikely to ever live independently is currently being considered. Cork City Council in collaboration with key stakeholders such as the HSE (Health Service Executive) Social Inclusion team and the Mercy University Hospital are exploring accommodation options to cater for this specific cohort who require care and case management in a supported living setting.

Conclusion

Despite the complex and multifaceted challenges of homelessness and the provision of further extensive supports in 2024 to those who are experiencing homelessness, Cork City Council is well placed, given the strong interagency collaborations and NGO support, that the need and volume of homeless presentations in Cork City can be effectively managed. This will be helped by incorporating strategic projects which are specific to identified needs and will ensure that individuals and families are supported in their time of crisis.

Brian Geaney,
Deputy Chief Executive.