

Joint Committee on Housing; Local Government & Heritage

Opening Statement: Dublin Town

5th March 2024.

We would like to start by thanking the committee for extending an invite to us to participate in this important conversation.

By way of background, Dublin Town is Dublin City Centre's Business Improvement District. As the name suggests our role is to promote businesses in our district which is the city centre's commercial core from Stephen's Green to Parnell Street.

The organisation was established in accordance with the Local Government (Business Improvement District) Act 2006, by local businesses. We serve 5 year renewable terms following a plebiscite conducted by Dublin City Council amongst local businesses. Our fourth term commenced on 1st January 2023 and will continue to 31st December 2027.

Our membership comprises all rate payers within the district; 50% of whom are retailers; 35% are within the hospitality sector and 15% are service businesses based in offices within the district.

In 2023, the city core welcomed a daily average of 237,000 people. All aspects of life and society are reflected on the city's streets. This includes social challenges such as homelessness, drug dependence and challenging personal behaviour. These issues can and do lead to a feeling of unease amongst the general public and are reflected in poor perceptions of personal safety reported by many who visit the city.

Dublin Town has always sought to engage proactively in addressing issues which can cause concern amongst city visitors. Dublin Town supports professional bodies and agencies and their staff in the provision of services to vulnerable members of society. We were active participants in the Better City For All group which reported in 2012 and are again engaged in the more recent re-iteration of this group. The work of the Better City For All process aims to promote good practice in the management of social challenges, leading to better outcomes for vulnerable members of society and also the wider community who use and frequent Dublin City centre.

As noted, research confirms that the single greatest barrier to people enjoying Dublin city centre are poor perceptions of personal safety. This is underscored by the fact that when asked what would persuade people to visit the city more frequently, the most proffered answer is more Gardaí on the streets; an answer that was provided by 39% of respondents in April 2023. In the same survey issues pertaining to drug taking was mentioned by 15% of respondents and resolving homelessness by 7%. For comparison, improvements to public transport was mentioned by 22% and issues of city cleanliness by 18%.

All cities and large population centres have social challenges to address. It has always been our view that everyone, no matter their background, deserves to be treated with equal respect and to have their human dignity respected. Everyone should feel welcome at all times in Dublin city centre.

However, from our research and observations of city life we have come to believe that there are shortcomings in how we, as a society, are providing necessary supports to those in need. This is sub-optimal not only for those in receipt of services but also for the wider public who use Dublin city centre.

1. There is a heavy concentration of social services provided within the city centre particularly on the city's north side. There are districts of 250m radius where up to 1,000 highly vulnerable people are being accommodated. There are locations where we understand over 300 people, who have been asked to leave other accommodation, are now being housed. This is inconsistent with best practice and at variance to the Findings of the Better City For All report in 2012. This heavy concentration of service provision is contributing to poor outcomes for those in receipt of services, mitigates against addressing underlying reasons for personal challenges and is facilitating drug markets within the core city centre. This in turn impacts on perceptions of personal safety amongst the general public and is contributing to general commentary in the media and elsewhere that Dublin city is not safe and is not well managed. Dublin Town believes supports provided to the most vulnerable should be provided in a holistic and compassionate manner, in which the symptoms of homelessness as well as the underlying reasons for personal challenges are addressed.
2. The effectiveness of certain supports to those experiencing homelessness in Dublin city centre has been subject of professional research. We would like to bring your attention to a report authored by Mary Higgins in August 2021 for the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive entitled On-Street Food Services in Dublin: A Review. While respecting the bona fides of people volunteering their time, effort and resources for the benefit of others, the report addresses concerns which have arisen with aspects of on-street supports currently provided in Dublin by various groups. The report also provides concrete recommendations as to how to address these concerns in order to provide a better integrated support network for those in need. We would like to highlight some of the issues raised in the report and its conclusions. We would further note that these findings chime with a similar study undertaken in the UK in 2005:
 - a. The report notes “the groups do not have skills or experience to engage with people who are homeless and there are examples where their interventions are undermining the work of mainstream providers and possibly supporting people to remain on or return to the streets.”
 - b. “The model of on street services where people queue for food and eat in public view on the main streets of the city is inherently undignified and is potentially unsafe. No attention is paid to nutritional needs or food safety, and crowds that gather at the food stalls are thought to attract drug dealing and other unsavoury activity putting people who are vulnerable at risk.”
 - c. “Evidence suggests that the majority of on-street services are not formally constituted are not registered as charities, do not hold trading licenses (a pre-requisite of registration with the HSE EHO) and are not compliant with food safety standards and other regulatory requirements. It is possible that they are not aware of those requirements or that they apply to them.”
 - d. “There is a failure individually and collectively on the part of official bodies to protect the welfare and safety of members of the public and people who are homeless and vulnerable by implementing and enforcing existing regulations in relation to charities, food safety, services for people who are homeless.”

Dublin Town agrees with the key recommendations emanating from the report:

- a. “Introduce a system of licensing, inspection, and enforcement for all services working with people who are homeless and ensure that unlicensed services cannot operate. Licensing will give assurance to people who are homeless and to members of the public about the services and ensure consistency in practice.”
- b. Higgins refers to other reports on homeless services in Dublin, noting that the most recent report includes “The key recommendation is for a more strategic approach to be taken to the planning and management of Day Services, through the establishment of "hubs" that would provide for central coordination to reduce duplication of effort and to enhance impact.”

Dublin Town engages extensively with the DRHE and its outreach team. The work conducted by this team is exemplary. We are of the view that it could benefit from additional personnel resources. The team engages endlessly and compassionately across the city with a wide range of people who often have complex needs. We believe additional personnel would be likely to have significant positive outcomes for those experiencing homelessness and the wider community.

Dublin Town has concerns with the provision of tents and sleeping bags at a time when there are sufficient beds in the system for all people who need them. We do not believe that people should be encouraged to sleep rough on city streets. We believe that it must be inherently safer to be in a secure, managed and warm environment with access to food and hygiene facilities than to sleep on the streets, unprotected and exposed to the elements. Furthermore, it has been our experience that not all tents are occupied by people experiencing homelessness and that in certain situations tents are providing cover for various forms of anti-social behaviour during the day. We have noted that a proportion are abandoned in the evening.

More recently, our engagement with an NGO, which is engaged in the provision of drug and homeless services, highlighted a further concern. The over-riding sense derived from the meeting was that the personnel working with the NGO are experiencing a considerable degree of stress in seeking to provide supports to an ever growing number of people seeking their assistance. We were advised that a significant source of the increased demand derived from asylum seekers who are given contact details of NGO's, such as the one that we engaged with, when they arrive in Ireland. We are not convinced that it is optimal for either asylum seekers or drug/homeless service users to be supported through the same structures given the often complex but non-symmetrical nature of the needs of both groups. The relevant needs of both groups and how they can be best provided requires further detailed consideration and the optimal form of service provision devised.

We hope that our insights and experiences will be of interest to the Committee. We would welcome your observations and will seek to answer any questions arising from it.