

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COISTE UM THITHÍOCHT AGUS EASPA DÍDINE

## COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

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*Dé Céadaoin, 20 Aibreán 2016*

*Wednesday, 20 April 2016*

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The Select Committee met at 2 p.m.

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### MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Mary Butler,	Deputy Michael Harty,
Deputy Catherine Byrne,	Deputy Eoin Ó Broin,
Deputy Seán Canney,	Deputy Fergus O'Dowd,
Deputy Ruth Coppinger,	Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan,
Deputy Barry Cowen,	Deputy Brendan Ryan,
Deputy Bernard J. Durkan,	Deputy Mick Wallace.
Deputy Kathleen Funchion,	

DEPUTY JOHN CURRAN IN THE CHAIR.

## ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

### Election of Chairman

**Clerk to the Committee:** This is the first meeting of the Committee on Housing and Homelessness. No apologies have been received. The first item on the agenda is the election of a Chairman. I must now ask for nominations for that position.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I nominate Deputy John Curran from the constituency of Dublin Mid-West as Chairman of the committee.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I second that proposal.

**Deputy Kathleen Funchion:** On behalf of Sinn Féin, I nominate Deputy Eoin Ó Broin for the position of Chairman. This will be a very good committee which, I hope, will come up with a lot of solutions to the housing crisis. It is a cross-party committee, which is welcome. Deputy Eoin Ó Broin would be an excellent Chairman.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** I second Deputy Ó Broin's nomination.

**Clerk to the Committee:** There being more than one nomination, the questions will now be put in the order in which each nomination was received. I will put the first question: "That Deputy John Curran be elected Chairman of the committee."

Question put.

The Committee divided: Tá;, 8; Níl, 6.	
Tá;	Níl;
Butler, Mary.	Coppinger, Ruth.
Byrne, Catherine.	Funchion, Kathleen.
Canney, Seán.	Harty, Michael.
Cowen, Barry.	O'Sullivan, Maureen.
Curran, John.	Ó Broin, Eoin.
Durkan, Bernard J.	Wallace, Mick.
O'Dowd, Fergus.	
Ryan, Brendan.	

Question declared carried.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** The minority Government is working already.

*Deputy John Curran took the Chair.*

### Business of Committee

**Chairman:** I thank those who voted for me. It is interesting that both nominees are from the same constituency which is, perhaps, reflective of the issues as we see them on the ground. This is a committee of relatively short duration. As Chairman, I will be fair and impartial and try to conduct proceedings in a businesslike manner. Members are well aware of the issue in

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respect of which this committee is tasked with coming up with meaningful proposals and solutions in the short timeframe afforded to it. As Chairman, I will facilitate everybody's input into that process in as constructive a manner as possible. I thank Deputy Ó Broin for putting his name forward. It was worthwhile that there was a contest as it shows that the role is one which people were interested in taking on.

At the request of the broadcasting and recording service, members are requested to ensure that for the duration of the meeting their mobile phones and any other devices are switched off or put on aeroplane mode. It is not sufficient to only put these devices on silent mode.

In accordance with standard procedures agreed by the Committee on Procedure and Privileges regarding paperless committees, all documentation relevant to this meeting has been circulated through the document database.

The next item on the agenda is any other business followed by date of next meeting. The committee can deal with these issues either in private or public session. Is it agreed that we will continue in public session? Agreed.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I congratulate Deputy Curran on his election as Chairman. Given the nine-week timeframe within which we must conduct our business, it would be useful for the committee to have an informal discussion on the structure of the business of committee in terms of what we hope to do within the timeframe set down. If we could get agreement in principle in that regard today, we could then hit the ground running at the next meeting. I would like to formally propose that we do this as the next item under any other business.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I, too, congratulate Deputy Curran on his election as Chairman, even though he may only hold that position for a short time. This committee has been established to deal with what is a very important issue. It behoves us all to dedicate ourselves to ensuring that we identify priorities and resolve to deal in a non-political way with a problem currently affecting thousands of families in this country, particularly those living in the greater Dublin area. Those of us who represent the greater Dublin area know well the serious issue that the lack of housing and homelessness is there.

There are two issues that I would like to see dealt with, namely, homelessness among people who ordinarily would not be homeless but, through no fault of their own, find themselves homeless, including for demographic reasons, and the provision into the future of a good solid basis for identification of the problem prior to its becoming an emergency, including the putting in place of the necessary structures to do so. We must try to ensure that whatever happens following publication of this committee's report, we will never again have peaks and valleys in this area. Housing is an ongoing requirement regardless of economic situations.

**Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan:** We do not need to reinvent the wheel. We all know what the problems are. There have been so many meetings, reports and statistics on the difficulties that we are all aware of the range of issues involved, from the private rented accommodation situation to homelessness to the increase in rents and the mortgage arrears problems. The acting Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Kelly, held a high-level meeting more than a year ago, which was attended by many people and organisations. I presume we have proposals following on from that meeting. We would also have proposals from a more recent meeting that some people attended. I am sure everybody here, like me, was contacted today by various housing groups that were asking for this, that and the other. They all want to come and meet us. I am saying we do not need to reinvent the wheel or go back over old

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ground. Perhaps we might identify three simple questions that could be put to people involved in this area. We should ask them to suggest how we might address the issue, rather than telling us again and again what the issue is. That would be a practical way to move forward.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I thank the Chairman and congratulate him on his election. I welcome my appointment as a member of the committee. It is a committee that is not partial to any one area. It is important to acknowledge that the problem is felt all over the country in both urban and rural areas. I represent both the city and county parts of my constituency. We have to remember the need to strike a balance. I would like the committee to look at the lack of social and affordable housing and the difficulty of finding landlords willing to accept the housing assistance payment.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I am delighted to be on the committee. I want to make sure everyone is clear that homelessness is not confined to Dublin. It is also an issue in the regions and small towns. I agree with Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan that we do not need to talk about what the problems are. From now on, we need to try to come up with a few solutions. It will not be easy, but if we all work together and put our collective brains together, we should come up with something to help matters. While we need to concentrate on the short term, we also need an overall policy for the future. Housing should not be provided as a knee-jerk reaction to demand; it should be planned for with an eye on what will be needed in the next ten years.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I would like to speak about the parameters of the committee. While I agree that the housing and homelessness crisis is felt everywhere, I must point out that it is worse in some areas than in others. I argue that the constituency I represent is probably the worst homeless black spot in the country. I say this on the basis of figures, not anecdotes.

I want to comment on what has been said so far. The first thing the committee has to do is to declare that there is a housing emergency. The previous Government was reluctant to do this. The immediate focus in this emergency should be on stopping homelessness from increasing. It is clear from last month's figures that it is increasing. There was a threefold increase in January. I think there was an increase of 48% in some locations last month.

The committee must look at the emergency legislation needed. The Minister has told us that the Constitution is an impediment to the resolution of the issue. That is something with which the committee has to grapple. We need to stop people from being economically evicted and introduce proper rent controls. The issue of compulsory purchase order has to be placed on the agenda of the committee immediately. I refer to the distressed properties being acquired by vulture funds.

I have heard comments about already having proposals and not needing to reinvent the wheel. There is a danger in that. I am not sure what exactly was agreed at the meeting mentioned but I emphasise that we need radical change because what was proposed previously has not been working. The committee has to come out and state there is a need for public house-building on a major scale. This would represent a radical change from the policy of the last Government and its predecessor.

The role of NAMA also needs to be discussed at the committee. There is widespread public concern about the way NAMA has been allowed to sell and build properties in certain areas. The people living in these areas who need homes cannot afford those being sold and built by NAMA.

I would like to conclude by suggesting we invite a new group on the scene to address the committee. I agree that we know what many other groups have already stated. Tenants in Tyrrelstown, Cork and other areas are in danger of being evicted from properties owned by vulture funds. I would like them to be brought in. We need to look at unique schemes to keep them in their houses. This could happen if the Government was to acquire them. Social housing is not the only solution in this context.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh leis an Teachta Curran tar éis dó bheith tofa mar Chathaoirleach. The time available to this important committee is short. I was not a member of any committees in the previous Dáil. To ensure members are armed with all relevant information, I ask that the Library and Research Service facilitate the committee by circulating all documents and reports produced by or submitted to previous committees that are germane to our deliberations. This should include documents submitted by the various agencies, including voluntary housing bodies. I agree that we must interrogate such organisations to determine what needs to be done to resolve the problem.

The committee should invite before it representatives of the National Asset Management Agency and the County and City Management Association. The latter should not be asked what is wrong but how we can fix the problem because that is the way to deal with the issue.

Rent allowance, the housing assistance payment and so forth are creating major controversy. Community welfare officers are the practitioners at the coalface and their representatives should also appear before the committee. Housing accommodation officers deal daily with homelessness in my constituency. We must ask them what solutions they would put in the mix.

Regardless of which parties or personalities end up sitting around the Cabinet table, it should be noted that my party has produced an action plan for housing similar to An Action Plan for Jobs. The committee should draw up a document itemising specific proposals for solving the problem, some of which will be complementary, while others may be contradictory. We must agree on what we can, produce proposals and press the button for the housing issue to change radically.

**Deputy Brendan Ryan:** I congratulate Deputy Curran on assuming the role of Chairman. Housing and health are the two most important issues of our time. In the case of health, when crises arise, people are dealt with and solutions are found. In the case of housing, however, satisfactory solutions cannot be found in many cases. Housing is probably the issue that frustrates me most at my clinics because it is one on which I cannot give advice. I ask people to find accommodation to rent when I know there is nothing to be found and the people with whom I am dealing have been searching for accommodation. This problem is highly frustrating and caused by a lack of housing supply.

We must find solutions. I concur with previous speakers that the committee must work in a non-political manner. There is no point in recreating something that is already in train. For this reason, we must examine current plans to ascertain what measures are in place or in the pipeline and which of these can be delivered in what timeframes. The committee has a short time within which to do its work. This urgency must be reflected in the frequency of our meetings. We should dedicate as much time as possible to this issue in the coming weeks.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I join members in congratulating the Chairman on his new role. To add to Deputy Coppinger's comments, homelessness is an emergency and must be treated as such. It is no harm that the Dáil set a short timeframe for the committee last week as it requires

members to be focused and to seek to make real and meaningful proposals. As the Chairman stated, a cross-party committee such as this should focus in its efforts on directing the Government to address the issues in the way that we see fit, having consulted the various stakeholders. On that score, the deliverables fall within four strands, namely, public and social housing, the private sector, the rental sector and those who are in mortgage difficulties. It is important that we separate these four strands and invite stakeholders with expertise who are at the coalface before the committee to be questioned on how the tools available to them can be improved to ensure delivery is accelerated. We should also direct any changes to legislation emanating from that process.

During the course of the debate last week, many people made what appeared to be reasonable suggestions in good faith. It is important that the points raised be made available to us all. Following on from the election, members of many parties and those of none had suggestions and manifestos which should be made available also. We must try to develop a plan to match that structure with a report to follow. As I said in the House last week the numbers as they are in the Dáil will be of help and assistance to a committee such as this to get the approval of the Dáil and work in conjunction with or direct the Government or its representatives to put in place the emergency measures required to address the issue. Whatever about the system in place for the provision of public and social housing, Department officials tell us they have moved the process from selection of sites to the delivery of units from eight stages to four and yet we all have instances throughout our constituencies where we are 18 months through that process and no ground has been opened. If it is down to four stages, maybe it needs to move to two stages. Department officials and those who work within the system need to be held to account in that regard. It is for us to question and tease out the difficulties to ensure the correct measures are put in place in order to deliver units because units are not being delivered. The private sector has a responsibility too and there are initiatives that could be put in place to entice it to be more successful. The area of rent allowance, the whole mortgage distress area, vulture funds and mortgage interest rates may overlap with other committees and maybe some information could be gleaned from other committees to assist us make the recommendations that can address those issues. Perhaps we can set out a timeframe to agree the way in which we will deal with this issue in, say, two meetings a week over a nine-week period or whatever. Let us agree the bones of it today rather than get into the meat of it.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** I thank the Chairman for allowing his name to go forward to be the Chair of this committee, even if it is only for a short time, and congratulate and support him. As public representatives, we all know the difficulties on a daily basis for people who are trying to get a home. Whether one lives in Dublin or in any other part of the country, not having a place to call home is very difficult particularly when one has very young children and one is being moved from one accommodation to another. We are beholden to those people to do as much as we can as a committee to ensure we leave no stone unturned to put some concrete proposals in place to deal not only with social housing but private housing. Due to the lack of supply and the lack of housing, many young couples are finding it difficult even when they go to view a place to get into the market. We have to think of those also. Within the next couple of weeks, we must work together as a group and put aside any other issues we may have to pull together some solutions to the housing problems of all the young people and the homeless people.

**Deputy Kathleen Funchion:** I thank and congratulate the Chairman. It has been said that we have nine weeks to do our work. As that is obviously a short timeframe, we must ensure we are constructive, not just talking at these meetings but actually coming up with solutions. Therefore, we need to decide some of the practical issues today, such as how often the commit-



tee will meet. I suggest we meet at least once a week, if not more frequently. It is a regional problem but it is concentrated more in the cities of Dublin, Limerick and Cork and is a major issue everywhere. I believe that not only should we be inviting groups to attend here, we should also be willing to travel. As a committee, we have a national remit for other areas and for achieving a regional balance. We must not just speak to representative groups involved but to individuals who are going through homelessness, are in emergency accommodation or who have a different story in order to get a flavour of the situation at regional level also. This is important. We need to look at the issue from both a long-term and short-term viewpoint and to review the State supports in the private rental market, which are a short-term measure.

Today, however, we should focus on practical issues, such as how often we will meet. We should consider not just meeting here but being willing to travel to other areas outside of Dublin where there are housing problems.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** I, too, congratulate the Chairman on his election and ask him not to hold it against me that I did not vote for him.

Most of us would agree that matters will get worse before they get better, unless some immediate measures are taken to deal with the current homelessness and housing crisis. We can be certain that the situation will get worse in the short term unless radical measures are taken. People say that this committee should be non-political. I do not know whether that is possible but I hope it is. I do not know what potential this committee has as there are some serious stumbling blocks ahead of us.

Are we going to advocate direct construction of social housing by the State again through the local authorities or are we going to continue to rely on the private sector which has failed to deliver? There are huge challenges in terms of the supply of private housing in regard to how and what we build and addressing the massive problem of affordability. How are we to tie this in with creating an appetite for the private sector to build without feeding developers carrots that end up costing the public too much? If we have the wherewithal and the will to return to allowing the State provide housing through the local authorities, which I believe we should do, the big question arises as whether we can agree on how that will be funded. If that funding goes on the books, we will end up breaking the 3% rule, but if we go with PPPs, the cost will be too high. Funding provided by PPPs costs up to 15% whereas we can borrow money for less than 1%. Why should we pay 15 times the cost for the money needed to build the significant amount of social housing required? We are talking about a minimum of approximately €10 billion if we are serious about dealing with the issue.

I believe we need a break from the fiscal rules imposed by Europe. The French and Germans have broken the rules when they have felt the need and the British are now threatening to break the rules for investment in infrastructure. It is paramount that we are given a break by Europe and allowed to borrow money for less than 1% to provide a minimum of €10 billion for social housing to address the crisis over the next couple of years.

**Chairman:** The final contributor on this point is Deputy Ó Broin.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** When Sinn Féin initiated the idea of this committee, we were keen that it would try to do two things and what we proposed is in the spirit of what most members have suggested so far. On one hand, we want the committee to look at the current crisis and try to come up with constructive proposals for government to tackle some of the short-term and long-term problems. We are keen that the committee operates in that constructive spirit. How-

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ever, there is also a degree of urgency, not just because we have only nine weeks, but because the situation, as we all know from our constituency clinics, is getting worse. More families are presenting as homeless every day, not just across the city, but across the State and we have more children in emergency accommodation than we had six months or a year ago. We have to recognise that there is a degree of urgency in doing our job. I would like us to come away from this meeting saying very clearly that we are open to receiving submissions from external organisations. Any organisation that wants to make propositions, proposals or written submissions should be invited to do so for us to start hearing some of the information. There is a value in bringing people to the committee. I take Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan's point that there has been a lot of discussion but the situation has evolved a fair bit. There are things that were agreed to a year ago which, in the view of many, are not working. Therefore - Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan is correct - if people are brought in, it should be in a focused way. On that basis, there are at least nine thematic sessions we could consider, most of which have been referred to in one shape or form.

First, we need the Minister here. Deputy Brendan Ryan has rightly outlined that we need to know where things stand with the Government's housing plan. At the first opportunity, therefore, we should have the Minister here to outline what he sees his Department doing. We could put questions directly to him and tease out some of our concerns.

There is a need for a session to specifically look at homelessness, which should include a variety of sectors such as NGOs and local government bodies. There is a need for a session on social housing, not just to argue, as many of us will, that there is a need for more investment. For such a session, we would invite local authority and departmental officials to outline to the committee what the barriers were with a view to removing them and speeding up delivery of the promised units, as well as to consider broader points.

There is a need for a discussion on private housing. I am very interested in hearing from developers, estate agents and mortgage brokers on what they think are the current blockages in the market at the various stages of supply and in accessing housing. The private rental sector would be the subject of a stand-alone session. I would like to have here some representatives of the landlord organisations, along with representatives of NGOs such as Threshold, etc.

There is a lively debate taking place. We have heard the views of the Master of the High Court, legal experts and social policy experts. We could invite them to the committee for a focused session, particularly on compulsory purchase orders or other tools currently not being used. It is absolutely crucial - Deputy Mick Wallace did a lot of good work in the last two debates and before - to have a session on NAMA specifically.

We should not forget some of the social inclusion issues that are also part of the problem. There is an ongoing problem with the quality of Traveller accommodation. There are very large numbers of people who have their stamp 4 but who are still stuck living in direct provision centres, even though they should not be, and who cannot gain access to the housing market.

I propose another addition - this ties in with what Deputy Ruth Coppinger said - that the committee hear from people who are experiencing the housing crisis first hand. Persons living in emergency accommodation - residents from Tyrrelstown and young families stuck in over-priced private rented accommodation who are unable to save for deposits to buy - should be invited to the committee or other fora, as suggested by Deputy Kathleen Funchion, in order that their testimonies could be put to the committee. That would be worthwhile.



If we structure our work around these themes, invite small numbers of individuals to make focused presentations to the committee and hear questions from them, perhaps at two meetings a week, as suggested by Deputy Barry Cowen, it would give us enough time to produce a report and come up with recommendations on which there would be consensus, if possible, or minority or majority recommendations, to show what could be done differently to address the problem.

I thank the Chairman for his indulgence. I will conclude on the need for acceptance that whatever comes down the line, new approaches have to be part of any Government's response if things are to get better. Deputy Mick Wallace is right. The problem is getting worse every single day in the social housing sector, in the private housing sector and in the private rental sector. Unless there is a change in policy, things will not get any better. I recommend that approach.

**Chairman:** Having listened to the various comments made, to try to move things on, it is very obvious that there is a wide range of issues to be discussed. Deputy Kathleen Funchion summed it up well when she spoke about short-term, immediate, longer term and structural issues. Deputy Mick Wallace spoke about the building programme, etc., while Deputy Barry Cowen referred to the housing emergency. However, I am conscious of the committee's first port of call in one week's time when we must make an interim report to the Dáil. Having listened to everyone's contribution on the wide range of issues involved, most of us agree that, from a housekeeping point of view, the committee will need to meet twice a week. Is everyone happy with those general points?

I propose that we go into private session at this point to decide among ourselves how we would like to structure the business of the committee. A number of members have made recommendations and it might be worth trying to advance them. We are supposed to make an interim report to the Dáil by 28 April.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Agreed.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Without being awkward, everybody is talking about new politics. There is no reason we cannot discuss the mechanics of how we do our business in public session. There is value in staying in public session. From the conversation we have just had, I do not think there is going to be any disagreement over how we are to structure our business. I would suggest we stay in public session.

**Chairman:** Are members happy to stay in public session?

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I would not dispute what Deputy Ó Broin has said.

One thing that we have not talked about is how, in previous Administrations, we often had people to advise us on policy who would not be members of a committee or, necessarily, members of the staff of the Oireachtas. Although I am not familiar with the academics on this - I say that in a respectful rather than a derogatory manner - I do know that in the 1970s under the then Minister for Local Government, former Deputy James Tully, who was a Labour Deputy, there was a housing crisis. I do not recall the figures for what we built exactly but it was certainly as many houses as we are talking about building now. It would be useful if somebody could check the record as to what steps were taken then.

It would also be useful to examine what has happened in the United Kingdom. Where is the repository of knowledge? It would be useful if somebody could identify it, be they a profes-

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sional researcher, staff of the Oireachtas Library or whoever. When we are talking about what we need to do now, as other people have said, we do not need to invent the wheel, but we might be able to select some ideas from such an analysis of what has been done in other jurisdictions and in our own jurisdiction in the past.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I understand at the moment we are debating whether to be in public or private session.

**Chairman:** From my point of view, if people felt more comfortable in----

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** The aim is not to comment on everything that was----

**Chairman:** Agreed. I put it to the committee that rather than having a protracted debate, if the committee is happy to remain in public session----

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Yes, agreed.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** On that issue, the reason I agreed to go into private session was to try to avoid having everybody speaking on every subject and going around the houses on every aspect. I do not mind whether we are in public or private session, it is all the same.

I do suggest that, as part of the work programme, we should identify and have a response from the county managers throughout the country, or as many of them as possible. They may be able to identify the extent to which they, within their respective administrative areas, can address the problems that we face, both in the short term - the emergency aspect - and in the medium term as regards planning for the future, as well as addressing how to co-ordinate the two. We need that information fairly quickly. I have sought it privately in respect of my own local authority and have had some information. We need it for the other local authorities as well if we are going to be successful in dealing with the matter. Otherwise in two months' time, we will be still talking about it.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I propose that we deal with five different, targeted areas and invite relevant expertise and stakeholders from those areas. That would constitute five meetings on public and social housing, private housing, the rental sector, homelessness and issues surrounding mortgage distress respectively. I am not sure if there are any more areas. In those five separate meetings, relevant expertise and information could be called upon. In respect of the private sector, for example, we might have witnesses from the Construction Industry Federation, the planning institute, An Bord Pleanála, local authorities and relevant experts on spatial strategy. In respect of public and social housing, we would have witnesses from voluntary housing associations and local authorities.

There is also the issue of the financing of both public and private housing. We might engage with witnesses who have expertise in private financing. As has been mentioned, what has happened in other countries may have relevance. Credit unions are very interested in participating in the provision of funds towards housing. They should be invited in. It is a matter of selecting those witnesses and the areas that suit them. They could be the bones of five or six meetings. They might require two meetings each. I do not know. That is my proposal.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** If we were to agree on the approach of having themed sessions, we could add more - I would have more than five - and that would get us started. We are not going to agree on all of the names now but if the Chairman were to take it upon himself to correspond with the members of the committee by e-mail or through the clerk, we could add names as we

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move along. There are, for example, academic experts such as Ms Michelle Norris who is involved with the Housing Finance Agency, as well as the head of the Housing Agency whose job is to provide advice for the Government. There are also other experts. We could circulate a list and start with themes.

**Chairman:** If the five categories were circulated, members could add something that they do not consider is adequately included in them. Are members happy to do this? We need a starting point.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** There were nine areas outlined by Deputy Eoin Ó Broin. With no offence to Deputy Barry Cowen, they were more comprehensive and well thought out. The only proviso is in relation to private housing. Discussing private housing is fine but it should not become the focus of the committee.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** It is only one aspect.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I know but some people may have different views. Our purpose should be to resolve the homelessness and housing crisis rather than attempting to re-stimulate the private sector.

I wish to raise one issue that was left out of Deputy Eoin Ó Broin's nine categories. That is the issue of finance. There have been questions raised by Deputy Mick Wallace and others about whether based on EU fiscal rules the State is in a position to fund a house building programme through the local authorities, etc. We need to have a meeting to examine that issue because there is no point in coming up with proposals if, when we go back to the Dáil, the Minister for Finance - whoever he or she will be - will say, "I am sorry, but we cannot do this." There must be a discussion about financing a house building programme.

**Chairman:** Will Deputy Eoin Ó Broin repeat the nine categories he laid out?

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I agree with Deputy Ruth Coppinger on the tenth category she outlined. The first issue concerns the Minister. That would be a good starting point for the reasons outlined by Deputy Brendan Ryan.

The second issue is homelessness. We could, for example, look at the likes of NGOs, the Dublin Region Homeless Executive and the local authority homeless sections.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** We could also bring in community welfare officers.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Yes, we could.

The third issue is social housing. Again, we could bring in representatives of the local authorities, housing associations, the Housing Finance Agency and the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government.

The fourth issue is private housing. While I agree with Deputy Ruth Coppinger, private housing needs to form part of the discussion. We could speak to developers, estate agents, mortgage brokers, etc.

The fifth issue is the private rental sector. We could speak to representatives of NGOs and landlord associations.

The sixth issue is legal and academic expertise. Mr. Edwin Honan is one potential witness.

Ms Michelle Norris is another, as is the head of the Housing Agency, to throw out some names.

The seventh issue is NAMA which should be the subject of a stand-alone session.

The eight issue is social inclusion. We must not forget this issue, whether it concerns Travellers or those inappropriately stuck in direct provision centres. There might be particular issues to be discussed such as rural housing for the elderly.

The ninth issue - one I stress strongly - is the personal testimonies of people living the crisis.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger suggestion of a tenth topic is a very good one. It is the broader issue of how we finance social housing and housing provision more generally. They are the ten categories.

**Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan:** I wish to repeat my first point. For any representative coming to the committee, the discussion must be extremely focused on what exactly we are looking for in each presentation. That is the kernel if we are to achieve anything and come up with constructive propositions.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** We do not want to hear the history of each organisation, from where they have come or where they are at. We want to hear what their ideas and suggestions are to address the emergency and the immediacy of the problem.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** We could circulate their papers before they come in order that it would just be a case of putting questions and receiving answers during meetings. That would probably be more constructive.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I agree with Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan. I have read what Focus Ireland and all of the other organisations have stated. I am sure everyone else here has too, or we would not be here. I mean no offence but it would be a waste of everybody's time to run through it again. We could imagine something different relating to homelessness but there are specific issues to deal with, such as the conditions in which people are living at the moment. We do not need to bring in all the organisations to hear what they have to say as we know what they are saying.

**Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan:** In respect of homelessness, we need to hear about prevention. There are simple steps that can be taken to prevent more people going into homelessness. This could provide a short-term solution that could lead to better long-term effects.

**Deputy Brendan Ryan:** On the matter of the agenda, we have to consider public housing. The current crisis is one of housing supply, both public and private. If there was an adequate supply of private housing, the crisis would not be as grave as we would at least have temporary solutions.

**Chairman:** We have received a number of suggestions and I propose they be circulated by e-mail. We have clearly indicated that there are people whom we should invite before us to address the various topics and some may take more time than others. When we start disseminating this information it will be open to members of particular groups to make a recommendation or submission but there may be particular groups which we could target for their response on particular issues. This is a drafting, a first phase in which we are putting together some of the comments which have been made today and members will need to respond with practical proposals as to who they think could be helpful to us.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Going back to the proposal of Deputy Funchion, it is important we are not seen to be just focusing on Dublin and it would be a valuable step to have a number of sessions outside of this House, possibly in rural constituencies or in one of the Dublin constituencies where the problem is particularly acute.

**Chairman:** I agree with that but it needs to be relevant to the topics we have raised. I do not dismiss the Deputy's proposal but I suggest we build it into our plans in that manner.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Yes.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** We are all using the same language. We all know what are the issues and we have set out the structure. The Chairman will prepare a draft structure for us involving two meetings a week and we can then get on with the business. An easy way of getting our work under way could be to first bring in the Minister to find out what are his problems and what are the issues in his Department. Local authorities have a huge role to play and they should be brought in as soon as possible. Deputy Cowen spoke about the approval process, which is also a huge issue in the medium to long term. Addressing that aspect would enable us to deliver houses faster for communities.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** We do not have much time. I do not know how many so-called professionals the committee is looking to invite before us but most people can spend an hour saying what can be said in ten minutes. We could waste a lot of time talking and listening but doing very little unless we confine them to very short presentations.

**Chairman:** The Deputy is right and a number of people have said we do not need people to give us the history of their organisations. We know their history and most of us understand the issue. We are looking for solutions and proposals as they see it. If we are bringing in substantial numbers of people, the proposals need to be directed and specific. It will be up to us to inform them of this in advance.

**Deputy Brendan Ryan:** For the information of the committee, I have a sense that the Minister may not be around next week owing to previous commitments. It would not be the end of the world if we had some people in, such as homeless representative bodies, who could define the problem as they see it. The next step could be to find out what solution the Minister or his Department has in place. We can then build on that in terms of the adequacy of that response.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** If we are to have two meetings a week, one of them should be solely dedicated to meeting groups and hearing their solutions to issues with the other dedicated to thrashing out those issues. If we invite witnesses to appear before both meetings, we will not get to do the work we should be doing. It is just a suggestion.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** That can be addressed by having an all-day meeting starting at 10 a.m. with the taking of submissions from people followed by questions until 1 p.m. We could then tease out the issues in the afternoon. That would be constructive.

I raise another issue that may not be germane to this discussion but a serious problem is being experienced by people with disabilities in terms of home adaptation. I would be interested to know how we could improve the grant system in terms of more transparency and accountability because it is a major problem when people cannot live in their own homes. I am aware of somebody who cannot use the bathroom because they cannot climb the stairs. The person is due to have an operation shortly but will end up in an institution. Members may know of people experiencing a similar problem.



*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** This may not be the primary issue but it is important because they end up in institutional care because we do not look after them in their homes. That is a major issue for me.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I have two questions. We are meant to produce an interim report for next week. I am mystified as to how that will happen. Has the Chairman a proposal on it? I am not sure how we would suggest something that has been assessed and analysed in one week. It might be just the parameters that were-----

**Chairman:** The proposal for an interim report was as passed in the Dáil but it is not prescriptive; it does not state it has to have all the answers. The report is scheduled for 28 April, which is Thursday. I suggest that if we had a meeting on Tuesday, and we will circulate some of the ideas put forward today, the structure in terms of how the committee will work for the period would be the basis of the report, not the recommendations or anything else. It will be just what we agreed on the way forward. That is the proposal. I suggest that the suggestions made today be disseminated by e-mail, particularly in terms of people members believe would be worth bringing before this committee, and that we meet again next Tuesday. I take the point that members would like to meet on a Tuesday morning, take a break and meet again in the afternoon and because of the short duration, that might be a worthwhile exercise. I also believe there is a clear consensus that we should have two meetings a week to do the job of work in hand.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** My second question is that if that is being proposed for the first meeting and the Minister is not available, there should be a plan B. I agree we should not invite people to appear before the committee for the sake of it but it would be disgraceful if we did not hear from people who are homeless on some of the issues being experienced. Some of us are very familiar with them; we hear about them on a daily basis. That is something that could be done immediately. Also, I do not mind travelling as long as it is not being done as a public relations exercise or for the sake of it. That is just wasting time.

**Chairman:** No. I made the point that if we travel, it has to be relevant to the section of work we are doing. People from all parts of the country are represented here but if there is a particular reason members should see homelessness or the housing issue in a different context, we should build that into the programme. I do not have a problem with that but I agree with the Deputy that we should not travel just for the sake of it. There has to be a specific reason.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It would be time consuming. That is the problem.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** On Deputy Coppinger's suggestion about bringing in people who are homeless or in transition, who will make that decision? Who is going to pick those people? I would be very interested to know who will decide. How do we limit the number of people? How do we ask them, get their names and decide on who will come in and who will not? This would be very difficult to do. I suggest we spend an hour or two hours visiting somewhere people are actually living, such as one of the hostels, instead of bringing them in here. If the meetings are to be in public session, it will be very difficult for some homeless people to put themselves in a situation where their contributions are to be broadcast live around the country. Some people might not like that at all. Not all members would have to visit. A group of us could visit one of the hostels or hotels.



**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I hear what the Deputy is saying but it is really important that we afford to those who are experiencing the crisis exactly the same status as everybody else in terms of our engagement because their views are as important. As someone who worked for a homelessness charity for a number of years, I believe such charities can advise and suggest who the committee could invite and who they believe, from working with them, are competent and capable and would not be vulnerable or at risk. There are other organisations that could be considered.

Deputy Coppinger mentioned residents from Tyrrelstown. They appointed a committee themselves and could nominate somebody. We would be according people the status they deserve by bringing them here to give them the opportunity I have described. We would select them in the same way as we select anybody else, namely, by making a decision on who we believe would be appropriate to present to the committee.

**Deputy Brendan Ryan:** I wish to mention two elements. The traditional approach is such that all members believe they have to ask a question of those who appear before them at committee meetings. There are 14 of us present and we all feel we have to question witnesses on the business of the day. The challenge for the Chairman, in thinking about this over the coming days before we meet again, is how we can get to a point where, as a committee, we can work together to find solutions in practical ways rather than just going through the motions of asking questions of witnesses and trying to ask the smartest question. We are charged with finding solutions to problems over a short period. On that note, I question the value of wheeling in people who are homeless. We can bring in representatives of the homeless. We can all trust one another well enough. We are all practitioners, we all meet the people on the ground and we all understand the problems. We have all seen the faces of people who are experiencing a crisis. If the purpose of bringing them in is just to broadcast to the public, it is of questionable value. I seriously ask that we think again about this element.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I fundamentally disagree with the Deputy and will explain why. It is publicly known that a housing and homelessness committee has been established by the Dáil. We need to let those who are experiencing homelessness know they are being listened to and are at the heart of the matter. I have no problem going to visit a hotel or centre but that would not be the same as it would not be public.

With regard to how we select people, I absolutely agree with Deputy Catherine Byrne that we must be sensitive. If somebody is appearing before the committee, he or she knows its proceedings are in public and chooses to speak publicly. Many homeless families would love an opportunity to have a public hearing on the issues.

How would one choose people? We can all suggest a family, if we want, or we can ask organisations to choose people. I stress that we must include non-Irish people. It is not widely understood that non-Irish people are being hit hardest by homelessness, as is evident in my constituency. This is because they are more associated with the private rental sector. They experience particular issues. The Chairman could talk to members about potential witnesses and make a judgment on it. It would be wrong if we just brought in representatives of organisations representing the homeless. Some people working for homelessness organisations are making a lot of money. Their perspective would not be the same as that of those experiencing problems with travel, transport, obesity, diet, the lack of cooking facilities, etc.

**Chairman:** I want to make a comment. There are mixed views on the issue of invitations to individuals to appear before the committee. We will not make a final determination on that

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today. We suggested that we circulate a work programme and from that we are asking for suggestions as to who might or might not be invited to appear before the committee. That is not going to be signed off by a committee member or me, rather it will be signed off by all of us collectively. The names on the list will be discussed to ensure that who we bring in is of benefit and merit and that something worthwhile ensues. In that context, whether one is talking about individuals or representative groups, those suggestions should be made. We will determine as a committee the number of people and groups we can meet and whether they are relevant to the various sections. On the initial e-mail from the committee, it is important that members come back with who they think should be included, whether individuals or representative groups, for the different sections.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I refer to the comments made by Deputy Brendan Ryan. One aspect to consider is that people who are in the homelessness system are users of public services, whether social welfare services, homelessness services or something else. They have an experience which is relevant to some of the recommendations we are making in the sense that they might be saying their experience has identified problems which somebody providing or funding the service might not have noticed. As such, there is a practical benefit, beyond the need to give them a voice, in looking at their experience too. That is worth considering.

**Chairman:** The point I am making is that the decision on how many and what groups, as in the case of every other group, is one we will make collectively. It is not being ruled out.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I refer to the housekeeping issues. The Chairman has provided us with a default reply by saying lunch hour, or 2 p.m. tomorrow, and to then proceed with whatever we have at that time. I suggest inviting the Minister immediately and sitting members of the County and City Management Association. They should be invited to appear before the committee next Tuesday.

**Chairman:** Can I deal with the previous question? I am not dismissing the Deputy. In terms of next Tuesday, which will be the day of our next meeting, we have work to do before we have anyone in to further develop and agree on some of the groups we are going to meet. Without getting into the times, are we happy to have a two-part meeting next Tuesday?

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I have no issue with that. People want to see action and to hear these people speak.

**Chairman:** We are happy to have a two -part meeting. We will first ensure that the various interested groups and the structures the committee will follow during the coming weeks are agreed.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I am saying that we should not lose a week.

**Chairman:** We are not, because of the two-part approach.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** It should be done next week. They should be told to attend.

**Chairman:** Deputy O'Dowd is the member of the committee who said he was prepared to sit all day.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I am, I have no problem with that.

**Chairman:** My point is not to disagree. We will address the first issue, to ensure that the structures we are discussing now, which are at present no more than a series of suggestions, can

become adopted in some coherent way by the committee. Following that, we can proceed to the kind of sessions Deputy O'Dowd suggests, if everybody is in agreement.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** Deputy O'Dowd should be left in here on his own all day.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I would not question Deputy Wallace.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** To clarify, in the morning we will fine-tune the schedule and the organisations or individuals to be invited to appear before the committee. Is the Chairman then going to try to set up in the afternoon that the Minister and the managers would be brought in?

**Chairman:** I cannot promise the Deputy that.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Are you are going to see if they can be?

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** We will seek to do so. They have an obligation to come in.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** That is the place to start.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** Agreed.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** We start from today.

**Chairman:** That is the plan. I apologise for this but we are going through the mechanics of how we will operate. Our next meeting is on Tuesday. The first part of the session is to deal with finalising the structures and the afternoon session is allocated to the Minister and the city and county managers. The one concern is that we are bringing them in with a very broad format. Perhaps we will be able to narrow it down. It goes back to some of the comments made about specific questions. We should be conscious of it. Beyond next Tuesday, we should focus our questions while the submissions people are prepared to make should be more specific and targeted. We will not have this advice or direction ready by tomorrow to be sent to the relevant people.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** We have agreed that if they want to give us a document in advance, that is fine. However, when they come before us, we will ask them what we need to change or do to make the issue resolvable. They are to provide proof as to how they see it. It is our job to ensure we can implement the practical suggestions we hear.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** The key is to ensure those who will come before us understand what the committee is about, namely, identifying the issues involved and finding solutions. We are inviting them to provide suggestions for solutions and focus on this aspect rather than telling us what is wrong. We all know what is wrong. It is a matter of finding the solutions together.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** Is there any chance we can confine meetings to two or two and a half hours? If we begin at 10.30 a.m., we should finish by 1 p.m. The afternoon session could run from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. or 4.30 p.m.

**Chairman:** I am in the hands of members. While I will try to make meetings as efficient as possible, as the Deputy knows, it all depends on how a meeting is going and its content. I do not want to cut it off arbitrarily.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** It helps if the duration of a meeting is confined.

**Deputy Brendan Ryan:** Are we planning to meet on a Tuesday?

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**Chairman:** Yes, on a Tuesday and probably on a Thursday to give us a day in between. If we meet twice a week, having a day in between meetings might be useful.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** We will need a little flexibility, given that, if a Government is formed and new Standing Orders are introduced, we will need to revise it. However, we can begin on that basis.

**Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan:** Do we have a plan B in case the people we would like to invite next Tuesday are unavailable?

**Chairman:** No. The second session next week will involve the Minister and city and county managers. It is relatively short notice. They are Nos. 1 and 2, in that order. In case they are unavailable, would the committee like to suggest Nos. 3 and 4?

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Could we invite some of the civil servants at the top of those Departments?

**Chairman:** We can ask them.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** We should also sign up the National Asset Management Agency.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** The Housing Agency is a key player.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** The Chairman may want to use his discretion, given the references he already has.

**Chairman:** I have enough from which to work. Once we move beyond this and build a schedule, people will have more notice and the expectation in terms of their attendance will be better. It is relatively short notice for some of them. Are members happy to adjourn and meet next Tuesday morning? They will receive the documentation.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** Will the Chairman confirm the time of next Tuesday's meeting?

**Chairman:** We will meet at 10.30 a.m.

The committee adjourned at 3.10 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Tuesday, 26 April 2016.