

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COISTE UM THITHÍOCHT AGUS EASPA DÍDINE

COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Déardaoin, 26 Bealtaine 2016

Thursday, 26 May 2016

The Select Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Colm Brophy,	Deputy Eoin Ó Broin,
Deputy Mary Butler,	Deputy Fergus O'Dowd,
Deputy Ruth Coppinger,	Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan,
Deputy Barry Cowen,	Deputy Maurice Quinlivan,*
Deputy Bernard J. Durkan,	Deputy Brendan Ryan,
Deputy Michael Harty,	Deputy Mick Wallace.
Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran,	

* In the absence of Deputy Kathleen Funchion.

DEPUTY JOHN CURRAN IN THE CHAIR.

BUSINESS OF SELECT COMMITTEE

Business of Select Committee

Chairman: Good morning. We are now in public session.

At the request of the broadcasting and recording services, members are requested to ensure that for the duration of the meeting, their mobile phones are turned off completely or switched to aeroplane, safe or flight mode depending on the device. It is not sufficient to put phones in silent mode as this will maintain the level of interference with the broadcasting system.

In accordance with standard procedures agreed by the Committee on Procedures and Privilege for paperless committees, all documentation has been circulated to members on the document database. I propose we go into private session to deal with correspondence and certain other matters.

The committee went into private session at 10.34 a.m. and resumed in public session at 10.40 a.m.

Social Justice Ireland

Chairman: Before we proceed, I ask colleagues and witnesses to either turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode.

I draw witnesses' attention to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to this committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise nor make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. The opening statements submitted to the committee will be published on the committee's website after the meeting. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I welcome Ms Michelle Murphy from Social Justice Ireland to the meeting. The full submission from Social Justice Ireland has been made available to members. I invite Ms Murphy to make an opening statement, which will be followed by questions from my colleagues.

Ms Michelle Murphy: I thank the Chairman and the members of the committee. Social Justice Ireland welcomes the opportunity to make a presentation to the committee on the issue of social housing supply. Ireland faces an immense social housing challenge. It will be a major challenge for the Government to secure sufficient finance to provide the scale of social housing required. There is no possibility of providing the level of financing required to deal with the scale of the problem on the Government balance sheet within the current fiscal rules. Social Justice Ireland recommends that the Government should put in place an off-balance sheet mechanism that could access the low-cost finance required to address the lack of supply of social housing in a way that would be sufficient to eliminate current waiting lists.

In recent years, Government policy was based on the premise that the private sector would provide sufficient rental accommodation to meet the total need for accommodation. However, the private sector is not coming close to delivering the number of units required to meet current demand. Although the social housing strategy is welcome, even if it succeeds in providing the planned increase in social housing levels, it will be far from the levels required to eliminate housing waiting lists. The strategy is not going to meet the demand that exists unless a new approach is taken to secure the necessary finance. Further initiatives on a much larger scale are required. The key challenge is to increase the supply of housing in general and of social housing in particular. An increase in the supply of social housing units would take the pressure off the private rental market and supply in the private sector. It would also take families out of hotels and enable them to find homes, to build bases and to participate in community and society.

Social Justice Ireland recommends that the Government should fully resource the social housing strategy. The effect of an expansion on the scale of the strategy would be to eliminate the current waiting list of 90,000 households and to provide for increased demand for social housing in coming years. It would not be possible for the Government to finance this level of provision on the books because of the fiscal rules that have been adopted since the crash. Therefore, a viable means of financing this provision off the books is urgently required. Social Justice Ireland proposes that the Government should put off-balance sheet financing structures in place to generate sufficient capital to finance the supply of the new social housing that is needed to eliminate current waiting lists and meet the additional demand that will emerge as the population grows. We also believe the Government should explore the use of NAMA as a housing agency with the ability to access and distribute appropriate off-balance sheet funding while taking an active role in the direction and support of approved housing bodies.

Our proposal contains two components. First, we are proposing the provision of an off-the-books financing mechanism for social housing stock through a special purpose vehicle. Second, the provision of this mechanism should be followed by the introduction of a cost rental system for social housing where the differential rent ceiling is removed. For the purposes of this brief presentation, I will focus primarily on the financing component. It is clear that the Exchequer cannot provide the funding necessary to deal with current demand. We are proposing that the Government should put in place off-balance sheet mechanisms to access the low-cost finance required to address the supply issue. Ireland cannot continue to borrow using traditional methods because this adds to the Government deficit, which we are committed to reduce. At the same time, there needs to be an adequate supply of housing for those on low incomes. This is required to stabilise the rental market and enable a cost-based rental system to work within the market.

Social Justice Ireland is recommending an examination of the possibility of using a vehicle such as NAMA, which has expertise in developing a financing mechanism. Given that approximately 107,000 social housing units are owned by local authorities and rent is being regularly paid in respect of them, it should be possible to put together a proposal that meets the EUROSTAT conditions for an acceptable off-balance sheet initiative. One of the advantages of using NAMA is that it already has a special purpose vehicle that has been approved by EUROSTAT. It is worth noting in this context that EUROSTAT's classification of public private partnerships implies that this method is unlikely to be suitable to address the supply of social housing units as the Government would be required to take on the construction risk, meaning that the public private partnership expenditure would remain on the balance sheet. Social Justice Ireland proposes that when the stock of social housing supply increases to such an extent that waiting lists have been eliminated, the Government should move to a cost rental system for social housing

stock and remove the differential rent ceiling.

Chairman: I thank Ms Murphy. A number of colleagues have indicated that they want to ask questions. I will take a couple of them together and Ms Murphy might answer them accordingly.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank Ms Murphy for her presentation. In my previous role as a member of a local authority, I and others argued in favour of using the model outlined by Social Justice Ireland as a means of making more finance available to local authorities to build housing. On foot of the EUROSTAT decision on Irish Water, it has been argued that funding local authority and public housing off-balance sheet will be much more difficult in practice than in theory. Has Social Justice Ireland examined the EUROSTAT ruling and is the decision on whether Irish Water is off-balance sheet relevant in the context of public housing? This is an important issue.

On the use of the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, as a vehicle for public housing provision, would the housing stock be owned by the agency or another entity such as an approved housing body? Has Social Justice Ireland examined the issue of ownership? Who would fund the building works? Would they be funded through borrowing from the Housing Finance Agency or the private sector or would NAMA's cash reserves and surplus be used for this purpose? Has Social Justice Ireland teased out the details relating to this issue?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I welcome Ms Murphy's address and thank her for the constructive approach Social Justice Ireland has taken. We all agree that it is imperative to identify a means of providing for off-balance sheet funding for local authority housing. This is a major national, social and economic issue as it relates to the ability of families to obtain housing, which is a basic requirement in any society. The right to a home is a fundamental issue. People need homes and if we cannot solve this problem, we cannot solve any other problem. This is the primary problem we face and, notwithstanding the issues raised by EUROSTAT, it should be possible to resolve it.

I support the suggestions that have been made. NAMA may have a contribution to make. We all agree that we should achieve what we can through NAMA and by other means.

I am a great believer in the provision of local authority housing by local authorities, whether this is done by means of public private partnerships or an off-balance sheet funding framework that has yet to be agreed. It is imperative that this is done quickly because the longer we await a decision, the worse the problem will become and the more forlorn those on local authority waiting lists will be.

I support the submission in principle. As I stated, a number of entities are willing to work out the mechanics of achieving off-balance sheet funding for housing construction and have made submissions to the committee in this regard. Some of us have tried to do this through local authorities. It should not be a problem to work out a joint venture between local authorities and the banks or credit unions, representatives of which appeared before the committee, with a view to ensuring local authorities take responsibility for the provision of local authority housing in the first instance.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The issue of using off-balance sheet and special purpose vehicles will be critical to the committee. Departmental officials will appear before the committee next week to discuss this complex issue. I agree with Social Justice Ireland that NAMA should

be used to address the housing problem. I have been arguing for two years that NAMA will be instrumental to resolving the issue because it currently controls one third of all development land in Dublin where the housing crisis is focused, albeit not exclusively. Furthermore, NAMA is a major operation in its own right.

The difficulty is that in 2009, when NAMA was established, different rules applied and it appears that EUROSTAT keeps changing the rules. Would NAMA not be in breach of the rules if it were to become involved in the development of social housing? I raised this issue recently with the Minister, Deputy Coveney, during a brief meeting he held with the political parties. We will raise this issue with the Minister again. He indicated that if NAMA were to become involved in this area, its role would not be one of an off balance sheet special purpose vehicle. What is the witness's view on something I raised the other day? The EU fiscal rules do not prohibit spending if commensurate revenue is raised to pay for that spending, which is never really discussed. The Government rules it out and says it cannot do that off balance sheet. However, it could introduce a whole range of taxes, for example, housing crises taxes. We keep hearing that there is not a shilling in the country but the evidence would suggest otherwise. We have already said that the rich list would indicate that the 250 richest people in Ireland have one third of GDP and have increased their wealth by about 3%. For example, we could have a 3% wealth tax or we could enforce the 12.5% corporation tax rate. The Anti-Austerity Alliance estimates that would raise €2 billion this year but actually it would raise more because the profits of the top 1,000 companies in Ireland have increased this year by 25%.

It appears as if the off balance sheet thing is impossible. An official from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government said on the "This Week" programme that it was impossible to do anything off balance sheet now given the rules that exist. We have to tease this out. He is in the Department's new funding models area and he concluded by saying that no new model that would itself be capable of providing and-or financing social housing on an off balance sheet basis has emerged. It seems to me that must we breach the EU rules and say we will not abide by those rules as they are paralysing our country and forcing a housing crisis on hundreds of thousands of people and impoverishing many others paying rent. If we do not do that, this housing crisis will continue. However, we could also propose new funding being raised by progressive taxation on the wealth of those who can afford it.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. I will allow Ms Murphy to respond. From the committee's point of view, this whole area of the off balance sheet is quite important. I remind colleagues, arising from a request from Deputy Ruth Coppinger, the Department of Finance will come in to specifically to tease out this issue further.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Yes.

Chairman: The point has been made that NAMA already has a special purpose vehicle which is off balance sheet in terms of the properties it is providing.

Ms Michelle Murphy: I will start with Deputy Ó Broin's questions. In terms of the EUROSTAT decision on Irish Water, there was no actual collateral. The way we would see this is that NAMA would be reconfigured as a housing body or housing agency, as recommended by NESC in its 2014 report, because NAMA has a special purpose vehicle that was approved in 2009 specifically to deal with property development. The key issue is that this SPV will have a majority of private equity. We would see the reconfigured NAMA taking the expertise from local authorities and using at least half of the money available from the Irish League of Credit Unions and then going to the markets to borrow at very low rates. The fact of the matter is this

SPV has already been approved. The issue is how to reconfigure NAMA as a housing body to go out and borrow the money required to address the issue.

The question of who owns the stock is the issue. If the public private partnership model is to be used and if one is considered the economic owner, then the risk has to remain on balance sheet. Therefore, one would have to be considered not the economic owner. Therefore, the housing body which would have to be a separate entity would own the stock through the local authorities. We would see the local authorities being rolled into this.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Does that mean the SPV would own the stock?

Ms Michelle Murphy: Yes.

Chairman: Would it be the special purpose vehicle rather than the approved housing body?

Ms Michelle Murphy: It would not be an approved housing body as such, that is separate, but the housing body or the housing trust that would be set up would control the SPV. There is a housing agency, so it would have to be renamed.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Would the stock revert to the local authority at the end of the process?

Ms Michelle Murphy: That is what we would see happening, because that would move it to a cost rental system and remove the differential rent.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I believe it is very dangerous to talk about removing the differential rent system from council or other tenants. Currently, most people pay approximately 30% of their income on rent. We do not want to see that happening to social housing tenants.

Ms Michelle Murphy: That would not happen until we had sufficient supply, at the point where we would have a huge amount of mixed housing stock. The differential rent would be removed once we had sufficient supply. We could still move to a cost rental system which is below market rate, but the approved housing bodies managing those properties would generate enough income to both maintain and develop the properties. The problem currently is that when the Government funding and capital expenditure people are totally reliant on disappears, local authorities do not even have the money to maintain their stock.

On the point made by Deputy Durkan, the local authorities do have expertise in terms of building social housing units and this needs to be brought into play. We have always advocated using some of the money available from the Irish League of Credit Unions and to use that money in the markets to generate the funding required.

Deputy Coppinger asked about the fiscal rules. It is correct that the fiscal rules do not prohibit spending if commensurate revenue is raised. There is also a possibility to tweak the fiscal rules in terms of spending on social infrastructure and there is nothing to stop the Government from increasing revenue in order to generate expenditure to fund social housing. The issue is the scale of the problem. If we are to eliminate the waiting lists and build the units required, we need expenditure of approximately €10 billion. It would be very difficult to raise revenue of that amount over the lifetime of the Government just to fund social housing. We fully support the idea of increasing Government revenue to fund current expenditure and the ongoing expenditure related to social housing - HAP, rent supplement, maintenance of the stock, the education and health systems - but it would be very difficult to generate that amount of revenue to build

the units required in the timescale we have.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Would it not be possible to alleviate the worst situations? The issue of people in emergency accommodation must be a priority.

Ms Michelle Murphy: Absolutely.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The strategic investment fund has approximately €4 billion and NAMA has approximately €3 billion in cash reserves.

Ms Michelle Murphy: The issue we have is that there has been “inertia”, for want of a better word, in terms of dealing with the problem. As Deputies Durkan and Coppinger have pointed out, there are reserves and funding that should be used for this purpose because we have a crisis. In general, when we discuss revenue raising, we have an issue as to what our reserves should be used for. Public and social infrastructure are funded by revenue and there is a case to be made in the long run for increasing our tax take. We need a stable and broad tax base if we are to continue to fund all of our public services.

Chairman: I apologise to Ms Murphy, but I am going to suspend our sitting at this stage as there is a vote in the Dáil and we have no pairing arrangements. We will resume immediately after the vote.

Sitting suspended at 10.59 a.m. and resumed at 11.20 a.m.

Chairman: Before the interruption for the vote in the Dáil, Ms Murphy had completed a series of-----

Ms Michelle Murphy: Let me make one point. I refer the members of the committee - it is a footnote in our submission - to the EUROSTAT ruling on the NAMA special purpose vehicle because a lot of what the committee has mentioned and what will be discussed at the meeting with representatives of the Department of Finance is and will be based on the interpretation of this ruling. It is important for committee members to be aware of the ruling prior to the discussions that will take place with the representatives of the Department of Finance because it gives specific details of how the special purpose vehicle should be run and the role of the Minister in determining its duration and that of NAMA and how it has been jointly created with a 51%:49% split between private investors and NAMA.

Deputy Fergus O’Dowd: I welcome the Ms Murphy’s comments.

Officially, under the Government’s building programme, there will be 25,000 units a year. If that figure can be increased by whatever formula, it will happen and we can borrow to do it. The Housing Finance Agency can borrow at a rate of 1.2% and lend to local authorities. Therefore, getting more funds is not an issue. Others will decide whether it will be off or on-balance sheet, but we must maximise whatever we can get.

My question to Ms Murphy is about the 200,000 houses which are vacant throughout the country. The Government’s position is that 70,000 are to be supplied in the next three or four years by the private sector, essentially, for HAP applicants. I do not see any sign of this happening because no houses are being released onto the market, even though there are houses empty. Even if there is a problem with two thirds of them, we must still be able to get one third of them. I wonder what Ms Murphy thinks of the following suggestion and I expect Deputy Ruth Coppinger to give out to me. We need to have a strategy in place to encourage the own-

ers of these houses to enter into a three, four or five-year commitment to provide them for local authorities or housing agencies in order to give them to tenants who urgently need housing. In the meantime, when we ramp up the building programme, we can look at the provision of tax incentives. It would be far cheaper for us to get, through the provision of a minor tax incentive for an owner, a house already built rather than spending €100,000 to €200,000 to have one built. We would get a much bigger bang for our buck. I wonder whether Ms Murphy has a view on the matter. It seems that is the crucial and critical way forward to increase supply which would happen more or less overnight.

Chairman: Does Ms Murphy want to address that point?

Ms Michelle Murphy: Vacant units have been slow in coming on stream for HAP applicants. There are a number of reasons for this - either the developments are unfinished or in the process of being finished or perhaps the units available are not suitable.

One proposal that we made last year, in terms of the provision of empty units and making use of underdeveloped land, was that a tax be levied on a monthly basis on houses fit to be occupied to encourage the owners to use them, to contact the local authorities and allow them to be occupied by those on social housing waiting lists while we waited for the housing stock to improve.

We have considered this issue. Something we encourage local authorities to do is to ensure units included in the figure of 200,000 that do come on stream are suitable. The process of making them habitable seems to be slow. Given the numbers of construction companies and construction workers, I cannot understand why the process is taking so long. There is obviously a blockage in the system in this regard. One of our proposals is to impose a levy on suitable empty units that could be occupied. We had suggested a figure of €200 per month and that the revenue from the charge be collected and kept by local authorities until such time as the units are put into use.

Chairman: Since the units are not coming into use, there is obviously a blockage somewhere. The demand is enormous. Has Ms Murphy identified the blockage?

Ms Michelle Murphy: Official statistics issued by NAMA and various other agencies show that, of the 668 unfinished developments, 447 have no active construction activity. Some 2,300 of the units are still under construction and a large number are vacant. These are the housing agency figures. There is no indication as to why it is taking so long. The last figures were from 2014 and 2015. There was €8.7 million given from the special resolution fund to complete or refurbish the developments and ensure they can be occupied, yet it is unclear why it is taking so long for this to come on stream.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: We disagree. Perhaps I misunderstood Ms Murphy, or maybe I did not. She is talking about a tax penalty as opposed to an incentive.

Ms Michelle Murphy: Yes. I suppose we have a different view.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: It is a very significant difference. It would be far easier to bring reluctant owners into the market if there were an incentive as opposed to a penalty. While I appreciate what Ms Murphy is saying, I believe the biggest problem now is that some landlords do not want to take the housing assistance payment. If they do, the tenant is restricted to a maximum lease period of two years. On the point of sale, or alleged sale, the tenant is put out. A formula should be developed that would encourage the establishment of a longer period —

such as five years, which would be reasonable — with a fixed income for the landlord and fixed tenure for the tenant. This should be encouraged. In one sense, Ms Murphy is talking about a use-it-or-lose-it tax in respect of those who are waiting for the market price to increase. We need to offer incentives also. Incentives will work. If I had a house to let and my incentive involved a five-year deal in which I knew what I was going to get, namely an arrangement with the local authority guaranteeing the structure and condition of the house, I genuinely believe it would work.

Chairman: To be fair to the Deputy, he has made his point. It is a matter that we will need to tease through when formulating our report.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I am just asking the view of the witnesses on having an incentive along with penalties. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Ms Michelle Murphy: There are not necessarily mutually exclusive. If one were to introduce an incentive, there would have to be some sort of penalty if the incentive were not used. A sunset clause would be very important in the design of the incentive. If the incentive were applied for only a certain period, the design and sunset clause would come into play.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Would Ms Murphy have a problem if there were a sunset clause and penalties? I am trying to find a consensus or formula that Ms Murphy could support.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There is no consensus on it.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I am asking my question to the witness, not Deputy Coppinger.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Deputy is trying to find a consensus on something there is no consensus on.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I am not asking Deputy Coppinger for her views. I know them and she knows mine. I am asking the witness.

Ms Michelle Murphy: With regard to incentives or penalties, what is required is careful design to ensure the incentives would not further distort the market. They would have to be designed very carefully. There should be annual reviews if incentives are introduced. There should be a review by this committee or another housing committee annually to ensure incentives have the correct impact. If they are not having the correct impact, one option would be to redesign the scheme. There should be a sunset clause for a minimum of five years. At the same time, there should be a levy on empty homes. We suggest a monthly levy. There should also be a levy on undeveloped land. The Government is to introduce this in 2018 or 2019 to ensure such land is used.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: That is fair.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: My question is about vacant sites and the levy. When the Minister was here, I asked him about this and he had various reasons it could only be 3%. He also indicated that on the advice of the Attorney General, it could not come in until 2019. What is Ms Murphy's opinion on that? What would Social Justice Ireland have done or what can be done in terms of vacant sites?

Ms Michelle Murphy: What we proposed last year was that local authorities should be empowered to collect site value tax on underdeveloped land. We would levy it at a rate of €2,000 per hectare or part thereof per annum to encourage landowners to utilise the land they possess

and to prevent speculation. Until such time as that is done, people will sit on land banks until the price rises. It is unclear to me what the difficulty is in implementing it this year. If it was announced in budget 2016, I find it difficult to understand why it could not have been implemented in 2016. I find it difficult also to understand why the levy is just 3%. While the Minister may have given particular reasons for this, the levy as it is designed will not encourage people to use the land they are sitting on.

Chairman: Does anyone else have a question? No. Before we conclude, will Ms Murphy go back to a point she made earlier? I acknowledge that Deputy Coppinger followed up on it but Ms Murphy might just explain it again to the committee. She talked about moving from the differential rent to a cost rental base. Will she explain her thinking on that again?

Ms Michelle Murphy: We see this moving to a cost rental system. It was one of the proposals in the NESC document on housing in Ireland. We see this as a much more long-term goal because it will be impossible to implement a cost rental system until there is sufficient supply. We see the initial objective as getting sufficient housing stock, consisting of both public and private housing units, before then moving to a cost rental system whereby the housing provider develops the accommodation and charges the rent on the basis of covering capital and maintenance costs only. While this cost will probably be higher than the differential rent initially, research by Threshold shows that a huge number of rent supplement and HAP recipients are already paying a top up, particularly the former. They also have very insecure tenure. The cost rental system is not just a question of removing the differential caps. One must be within a system where there is security of tenure and sufficient supply and it is not just a question of tax incentives for private landlords. One would be looking at approved housing bodies managing some of these developments. It is a much longer-term goal and would involve moving towards the system which NESC outlined that not only should one be developing housing for occupancy but the State should be able to ensure that we have a sufficient amount of housing available for long-term tenancy. These units would be suitable for single persons, families and older people or people with disabilities. This is a much longer-term goal and would require consensus around what sort of housing policy and housing strategy we have but prior to even moving towards a cost rental system, one would need the supply.

Chairman: That concludes this section. I thank Ms Murphy for her presentation and for her answers to the questions. The written submission will be published on the website. We will invite in the next witnesses.

Peter McVerry Trust

Chairman: I welcome the witnesses. I remind witnesses and colleagues to turn off their mobile telephones or put them into flight mode.

I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

The opening statements submitted by the witnesses will be published on the committee's website after this meeting. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I thank Fr. Peter McVerry, Mr. Pat Doyle, Mr. Brian Friel and Mr. Francis Doherty for attending to represent the Peter McVerry Trust. Their submission has been made available to committee members. I invite Mr. Doyle to make the opening statement, after which I will invite colleagues to ask a number of questions.

Mr. Pat Doyle: I thank the Chairman. I will ask our national director of housing, Mr. Brian Friel, to read the opening statement.

Mr. Brian Friel: The committee will be aware there are in excess of 6,000 people in homelessness across Ireland, of whom 2,000 are children. In addition to the family homeless emergency, there are more than 3,000 adults with no dependants in homeless services nationally. Individuals and, indeed, couples face enormous challenges in accessing housing. The people Peter McVerry Trust supports can often be excluded by mainstream social housing providers. Inadequate housing provision and housing supports mean that it is single individuals who face the longest wait for housing and the greatest risk of damage and institutionalisation by the system. Despite the deepening emergency across Ireland, there are only five counties where there are more than 100 people in homelessness. However, the situation is shifting dramatically. For example, in Kildare, the number in homelessness has doubled since 1 January and, in Tipperary, the figure has gone from four individuals to 54 individuals in just three months. In Dublin there are, on average, eight new adult presentations per day.

What must be done? First, there must be an emphasis on prevention. An obvious point that needs to be stressed is that the turning point in the fight against homelessness arrives when the number exiting homelessness exceeds the number entering homelessness. Without radical and robust interventions to fix our broken housing system and improve our child, health, education and social protection supports, we will not move towards eliminating homelessness. Over the course of the next 12 to 18 months, prevention measures must take on huge additional importance and a dramatic increase in prevention funding is required.

I turn now to youth homelessness and the question of children leaving care. An issue of particular importance is young people exiting care settings. An analysis of the 4,705 unique individuals supported by Peter McVerry Trust in 2015 shows that at least 20% of these had a history of under-18s residential care. A specific example of the impact the inadequate after-care supports for young people leaving care can have on homeless figures is our service at St. Catherine's Foyer in Dublin. This is a supported temporary accommodation service providing homeless accommodation for young people aged 18 to 26. It accommodated 70 young people in 2015 and of those 70 young people, 37, or 52%, had a history of under-18s care. Those 37 young people should never end up in adult homeless services. The solution is a robust and effective aftercare programme with ring-fenced, step-down and independent living units for young people exiting care.

Another cohort of people who end up accessing homeless services are those who are engaging in drug treatment programmes, be they stabilisation projects or the completion of residential drug treatment programmes. Individuals who have successfully detoxed or stabilised their drug use find themselves re-entering homelessness and more often than not are offered emergency accommodation with active drug users. The creation of health-funded stabilisation beds and

aftercare beds for these individuals would ensure that they receive appropriate accommodation outside of mainstream homeless services.

One further group becoming homeless as a result of the failings of another Government Department are those exiting prisons. The committee has heard of persons with acute and terminal illnesses being discharged into homelessness from hospital settings. Similarly, far too often people are freed from prison to go directly into our homeless services. These are further examples of one Department wiping its hands of the vulnerable and expecting the Minister with responsibility for housing to deal with the consequences. The solution is for the responsible Departments to fund alternative programmes. For example, the Department of Justice should fund a Housing First model for ex-offenders at risk of homelessness. This programme would provide multidisciplinary supports to ex-prisoners so they can secure accommodation and reintegrate into community and society. Peter McVerry Trust currently runs a small-scale and very successful programme of this nature.

Rent supplements must be increased as a measure to prevent those in private rental accommodation from becoming homeless. To prevent landlords simply increasing the rents even further, it should be accompanied by legislation linking rents to the consumer price index. An increase in rent supplement is not designed to free up more rental properties. It is designed to keep those on rent supplement in their current accommodation and out of homelessness. Rent supplement has been reduced by an average of 28% since 2007 but rents are now back to or beyond their 2007 levels. Peter McVerry Trust believes that rent supplements must be increased by at least 28%. The Department must ask itself whether it will choose to raise rent supplement or watch the numbers in homelessness spiral upwards.

The problem of mortgage arrears is a ticking time bomb. There are currently about 33,000 residential mortgages and about 15,000 buy-to-lets in mortgage arrears of more than two years. The vast majority of these are irrecoverable. Currently, 18,200 repossession cases are going through the courts. The Government needs to agree a programme whereby the most distressed mortgages would be purchased by approved housing bodies, AHBs. The households would then pay what rent they can realistically afford to the AHB. The balance between the rent paid and the costs being borne by the AHB would be paid by the State in the form of a HAP payment. The tenants would have a buy-back option. The approved housing body would commit to housing the existing household. The Government should also introduce legislation preventing the financial institutions - and in the case of Travellers, preventing the local authorities - from evicting families and individuals into homelessness.

Peter McVerry Trust believes that in order to address the housing emergency, it is imperative that a single overarching national housing policy is developed. The action plan for housing should include recognition of the right to adequate housing and be centred on the principles of affordability, equality and social inclusion. The action plan for housing should also recognise that we have a housing system and not just a housing market. There must be a targeted, evidence-led supply of housing. Supply alone will not deliver reductions in homelessness or help to address failures in housing policy. Supply must be designed to meet housing needs of those across society. Housing delivery must be State-led. We believe that the current social housing strategy, by which three out of four households on the social housing waiting lists are to be provided with accommodation in the private rented sector through the HAP scheme, is both unrealistic and undesirable. Two decades of trying to accommodate low-income families primarily in the private rented sector has been a major contributor to the current crisis. Trying to get out of the crisis by accommodating even more households in the private rented sector

seems illogical and, given the dire shortage of available private rented accommodation, unrealistic. Furthermore, under the existing loosely regulated private rented sector, households have no security of tenure and, for families with children, security of tenure while the children are of school-going age is a prime consideration.

With regard to the delivery of new supply, the Peter McVerry Trust makes a number of recommendations. To maximise the use of existing building stock, an urgent audit and compulsory purchase programme of empty private buildings should be initiated. This would allow these units to be returned to active residential use. There must be continuous real-time monitoring and management of our building stock and sites. An example of an empty building in Dublin is No. 31 Mountjoy Square, which is two doors away from the Peter McVerry Trust's head office. It is an empty building containing nine one-bedroom apartments. In April 2012, a receiver was appointed to the property. Since then, and more than likely for a period before that date, the property has remained vacant with the exception of a brief period during which people squatted in it. This is a prime example of a perfectly good building being held from the market, thereby restricting supply and, ultimately, increasing homelessness.

Modular housing can play a crucial role in the delivery of new supply. Local authorities need to deliver an additional 1,000 units of modular housing for individuals, couples and families who are homeless, low-income households, those in student accommodation - to provide some level of integrated housing - and people on the social housing waiting list. A separate relatively small-scale fund for approved housing bodies to build 500 units of modular housing in the greater Dublin region would fast-track the delivery of these units and create greater breathing space for local authorities. Any remaining voids should be turned around by approved housing bodies. In the context of a housing emergency, the question arises as to whether local authorities are best placed to use their limited resources to return voids to use or would they be better off focusing their attention on new build projects. Peter McVerry Trust believes approved housing bodies can quickly and effectively return voids to use, allowing local authorities to get on with the job of building new social and affordable housing. An intensive programme of renovation and restoration should have all appropriate voids inhabited within 12 months.

There also needs to be major investment in student housing. A rapid building programme involving 3,000 to 5,000 units of student accommodation in Dublin, Cork and Galway would immediately lessen pressures on the rental market, freeing up houses and apartments across those cities. Local authorities and third-level institutions must immediately meet in order to begin drafting plans for large-scale modular student accommodation on campuses or public lands. Removing students from urban rental markets would significantly lessen pressure on supply and free up housing options.

The Housing First model, which focuses on the rapid rehousing of homeless individuals and the provision of intensive wraparound supports, must be rolled out nationally. A rapid rehousing approach must become the standard approach to homelessness across Ireland. In those counties with fewer than 100 homeless individuals, Housing First is a much more logical and cost-effective response, rather than opening any further homeless shelters. In those 21 counties, a rapid rehousing programme could eliminate homelessness quickly. In the larger centres of homelessness, Housing First can play a critical role in tackling rough sleeping and long-term homelessness now and in the months and years to come.

Any decommissioned and currently unoccupied bedsits should be listed and analysed by the local authorities, together with approved housing bodies. Any units that can be renovated and reconfigured to deliver high-quality units of accommodation for single people should be

compulsorily purchased or leased on a long-term basis. A programme of works, to be delivered either by the local authority or approved housing bodies, should be instigated and the resulting units used to alleviate the social housing crisis.

A major investment programme is required in the area of cost rental. As a critical development to achieve a functioning rental system, a cost-rental model must be fast-tracked. The cost-rental pilot earmarked for 2016 must be ramped up, with investment rising from €10 million to €100 million, and be led by non-profit housing associations, either local authorities or approved housing bodies. The cost-rental model should not be reliant on private developers.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Friel for his presentation. To put it in context, the committee will be short-lived and is due to make recommendations by the middle of June. I thank the Peter McVerry Trust for the concise nature of its report with its specific recommendations, which is primarily what the committee has sought. It is now open to colleagues to ask questions.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I thank the witnesses for coming before the committee. Like the Chairman, I thank them for their concise report and the clear recommendations. That is what this committee is about. Having spoken with all stakeholders and everyone associated with this emergency, we hope to make a detailed analysis of the situation and offer clear and concise recommendations for the Minister to implement thereafter.

Regarding CPOs, has the Peter McVerry Trust examined the legislation and how it might be approved? Many local authorities assert that the powers within the legislation are not sufficient to meet the difficulties surrounding property rights and so forth that they face. We need a clear and concise indication from all and sundry as to whether emergency legislation is required in order to give the correct and meaningful powers to local authorities, a suggestion that is prevalent across the sector. The aim would be twofold, in that it would address the housing situation and help with the lack of vibrancy that exists in towns and villages around the country where the retail industry is not what it once was. Those towns and villages need life and residents' participation and our housing and homelessness situation needs to be addressed. Everyone - I could be accused of doing this as well - is saying that CPOs could be used for more beneficial purposes, but I hear from local authorities that they are facing difficulties in that regard. I need the witnesses and others to give their perspectives on where the roadblocks are and how they can be surmounted. We will then be in a position to ask the Dáil to introduce legislation that can make our aspirations a reality.

Chairman: If the witnesses would like to hold on for a moment, we will take two or three further questions. The witnesses might respond to them together.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: We all know of the work that the trust does, but will the witnesses give us a sense of the numbers of people they are actively working with and the kind of accommodation they are providing? What is the capacity of the trust to do more and what is stopping it in that regard? For example, what would it take for the trust to get the house on Mountjoy Square or other places? Is it down to funding? What would prevent the trust from delivering its service further?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I congratulate the Peter McVerry Trust on its tremendous work and the example that it has set down the years. I am not a great admirer of approved housing bodies, AHBs, which everyone knows at this stage. Fr. McVerry knows as well, since we have had this conversation many times.

Chairman: Then there is no need to have it again now.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I wanted to refer to it in passing. There would not be a need for AHBs if the local authority system had prevailed. Unfortunately, the weight of the housing issue is being thrust upon AHBs, which are not capable of dealing with it and were never suited to it. As the Peter McVerry Trust shows, though, they are capable of dealing with specialised issues, for example, addiction treatment and sheltered housing. There is a growing need for such facilities, and it is a need that will continue to a greater extent than we have ever known.

The problem is that, on top of the trust's work, responsibility for ordinary, general housing is falling to it, but doing it that way is not possible. Fr. McVerry will be sitting there in ten years' time discussing this issue if we do not revert to the original system, which I support, of local authorities providing housing with specialised issues falling to AHBs, which handle them well.

Rent levels have risen to what they were in 2007. We discussed this matter with the Irish Property Owners Association, IPOA, a couple of days ago. As a result of many contributing factors, however, incomes are sadly not what they were in 2007. Nor are they likely to be for some considerable time. We must address the issue of affordability. Various proposals have been made.

I will conclude now, but I wish to repeat an issue that I have raised previously. I am not a communist or socialist-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We have heard that.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: -----and I like to say so occasionally in order to achieve consensus. I see nothing wrong with the institutions that lent so liberally in the boom times bearing some responsibility for picking up this tab. I am not suggesting that they provide write-offs but rather that they lengthen repayment terms and so on. It is wrong that others would be expected to pick up that tab. In that context, I am not in favour of the approved housing bodies or any other housing bodies picking it up. Many of us have engaged on a one-to-one basis with the lending institutions on these issues and have been in court with them on countless occasions. Time and again we have asked them why it was sustainable to lend so liberally in 2007. Circumstances since then have not changed. The only thing that has changed is the economy, such that many people now find themselves in an impossible position. I urge careful consideration of the need to implant in the minds of the lending institutions that they bear some degree of responsibility and culpability for what happened. If we do not do that the result will be that nobody will accept responsibility. If we divide responsibility for housing among a multiplicity of bodies, the result will be that everybody will have responsibility and then nobody will have it. Responsibility for housing provision must be the remit of the local authorities.

In the context of leasing in Kildare and the adjoining counties, I am well aware of the issue. It is a serious matter and the position is becoming worse on a daily basis. The local authority is purchasing houses and making them available but it needs to purchase more. The Government has approved the necessary funding in that regard. We must impress upon all concerned the need to ensure that we achieve what we can, including the provision of modular housing, in the shortest possible timeframe.

Chairman: A number of the points made by Deputy Durkan will be addressed by the committee during its final deliberations on its recommendations. I ask the witnesses to respond to the specific questions regarding compulsory purchase orders, CPOs, and services. Also, Mr.

Friel stated in his commentary around institutional discharge that the Peter McVerry Trust currently runs a small-scale and very successful programme. Perhaps he would elaborate further on that.

Mr. Pat Doyle: On the issue of compulsory purchase by local authorities, we have not looked at the legislation but we are aware that it has not been tested in the courts. In our view, one local authority needs to act as the lead in this regard. What we have been seeking is a mapping exercise in one city or town to allow for identification of available stock there. Some landlords will want to do deals. The Peter McVerry Trust returned 39 voids to use last year on behalf of the local authority in Dublin. The average turnaround time per void was 12 to 18 weeks, the funding for which was secured by the trust. There was no cost to the Exchequer. We believe a similar exercise in the private market and further engagement with landlords is necessary. We also believe that where landlords refuse to engage, those cases need to be tested in court. Somebody needs to test the provision in court to see if change is required. The former Minister with responsibility for housing said that there were constitutional and other issues around CPO in respect of private property. However, the provision has never been tested in the courts. We should test it.

On the question regarding what the trust does, we had 669 people in our care last night, 145 of whom are in our housing stock. We are not into empire building. We do not want to become a large approved housing body. We became an approved housing body because some of our most vulnerable and challenging clients could not get access to the local authorities or some of the other big housing bodies. We became one ourselves to give them a key to the door. Last night, 145 people had a key to their own front door. They are no longer clients of the Peter McVerry Trust, but tenants of the trust. We also see the need for specialist providers like ourselves. One of those clients was a person we picked up on St. Stephen's Green. He is in a unit off Merrion Square. He has a Peter McVerry Trust addiction counsellor and psychiatric nurse and access to a trust therapist if he needs one. It is possible to give housing to the most vulnerable.

We have 19 children living with us who are under the care of the State, between the ages of 12 and 18. If they come in between those ages, the State will pay about €500,000 towards their care. We see no sense in putting them into homelessness. They already have the label of being in care and sending them towards homelessness services is another label and another failure. We want to see them going straight into housing. It is all about housing access. We have given over 10% of our current housing to children in care. They need more support - otherwise it will turn into a party - but that does not mean they cannot be supported or that they have to end up in homeless services.

We have 25 drug-free beds for people coming out of treatment. Those making the step to go through treatment should not also have to go back to homeless hostels or be around people who are actively using.

The project the Chairman mentioned is our specialist programme for people coming out of prison. This is a very low-key programme; we do not talk about it too much. There are housing units scattered around the Dublin city area, primarily. We go into the prisons and know that the individuals are already deemed as homeless, as they will have stated to social protection, the chaplaincy service or sometimes to the probation services that they will be homeless upon release. Some of them will have done very long sentences and are therefore also slightly institutionalised. Their best chance of survival and of not becoming repeat offenders when they come out is not to go into a hostel where they have to be out during the day and all of that, but to go into their own housing unit and let the work begin from there. We have 22 people in units

around the city. We give them up to six months and then get them into private rented accommodation.

That is why we want to see a rapid build of student accommodation, as we said in our statement. The highest population of young people in the country and the highest birth rates are coming from Kildare now. We run services there. Maynooth University is soaking up the private rented accommodation in Maynooth, Celbridge, Leixlip and Clane. At the same time, we have 14 young people in a hostel in Kildare. I am just taking that as an example. All of those 14 people are ready for private rented. They are all young and single. The avenue would always have been private rented accommodation for them but they cannot get near that market as it is all taken up by the university. In the future, whenever planning permission is given for extensions to universities, it should include modular, rapid-build units that can be built through a public-private partnership. It does not have to cost the State. The University of Limerick is a great example of providing large-scale student accommodation. Greater student accommodation provision would free up the market. It is the same with St. Patrick's College in Drumcondra. We have a lot of young people from Dublin's north side needing private rented accommodation, yet between St. Pat's and DCU there is nothing to be got out that way.

Going back to our specialist programme for prisoners, primarily the market for them would be the private rented market. We have 22 in our care at the moment and last year we had 48. The only blockage for us in taking more of those people from institutions is the move into private rented. We want to see a vibrant private rental market again. One of the ways to do that is to give greater supports to landlords. Another way is to take some of the other cohorts out.

In response to Deputy Durkan's point, we do not want to become the job of the banks. However, we heard from Ulster Bank this week that 2,900 loans are going to be handed over, possibly to a vulture fund. Some 900 of them are family homes and we know one of those families. The family has offered to pay €1,500 a month to the bank but the bank is saying no. The bank will sell that loan and write it off. Whoever buys the property will probably pay €1,800 per month on a mortgage. We are going to spend €45 million this year on hotel accommodation. I am not saying that the trust would take over 2,900 loans but we could, as Deputy O'Dowd said, ramp it up. We would certainly like to see the trust expand to approximately 600 specialist units for vulnerable people. There are others, such as the local authorities and approved housing bodies.

I will conclude. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government will shortly announce two capital assistance schemes, the purpose of which will be to acquire properties. These loans could be bought and we could keep people in their homes very quickly. Let us not forget that they are being sold very cheaply as well. It could be a great saving for the State.

Fr. Peter McVerry: To return to CPOs, I do not know what is the local authorities' problem. The National Roads Authority had no difficulty compulsorily purchasing houses and land when it wanted to build motorways. There was no constitutional problem with that. Why can we not compulsorily purchase houses for the far more important issue of providing people with homes?

I agree with Deputy Durkan that the local authority has to be the primary mover in terms of providing social housing. The housing associations and approved housing bodies are simply not capable of addressing the scale of the problem. We are going to get the housing needs assessment this year. There are certainly going to be well in excess of 100,000 households on the social housing waiting list. The approved housing bodies have no way of coming anywhere near that figure. It has to be the local authorities. However, I believe local authorities do not

want to build social housing and that they do not want to manage social housing, certainly not on a large scale. I have a problem with them purchasing on the open market, although it is necessary. They are competing with private buyers and thereby pushing prices up and reducing the stock of private housing, which is also an issue.

With regard to the banks, I agree that there is a moral argument that the banks should take responsibility but I do not think they are going to respond to moral arguments. We must make the mortgage-to-rent option obligatory. Banks have a responsibility to explain to the courts why that option is not appropriate in any particular case. It seems to me to be the obvious answer. It would mean that a family would be kept in its home and continue to pay rent - whatever it can afford - to either the local authority or to an approved housing body.

I would like to see legislation preventing anybody - local authorities or banks - from evicting people into homelessness. I do not believe that young people leaving residential care should be allowed to leave into homelessness. We had one young 18 year old who was discharged from residential care on his 18th birthday. It was a Friday afternoon, he had no money in his pocket and there was no accommodation arranged for him. That should be illegal. It should also be illegal for the local authorities to evict Travellers from unofficial halting sites until alternative accommodation is available. It should be illegal for the banks and the vulture funds to evict families into homelessness until alternative accommodation is available. If the mortgage-to-rent option and the inability to evict people into homelessness was in place, I believe the banks might accept their moral responsibilities.

Chairman: Does Deputy Cowen wish to respond on the topic of CPOs before we move on?

Deputy Barry Cowen: I take the point on CPOs. I was on a council myself for 18 or 19 years. Unfortunately, the laws associated with CPOs for land and buildings are not as strong as they appear to be for the NRA. They need to be strengthened and it should be incumbent on this committee to seek professional legal advice in this regard. The Government has access to the Attorney General's office. I remember being on the council and producing a county development plan. The executive had expertise at its disposal but the members, whose views and opinions might have been contrary to that of the executive, did not have the relevant expertise available to them in order to include in the plan the sort of content which they aspired to include. That is a fault that we must rectify on this committee. We must analyse the CPO legislation and make firm and forceful recommendations that the Dáil can enact in an emergency situation in order to address the seriousness and immediacy of the problem. We need the same powers as are available to the NRA to compulsorily purchase land and dwellings in order to provide pivotal infrastructure such as the NRA has provided in the way of transport and connectivity in recent years. I ask the Chairman and the committee to consider seeking professional legal advice on this issue, as well as the mortgage-to-rent issue. There was legislation on it in the last Dáil, but the bank veto remained in place and it was the opinion of the majority of the Opposition that it would put us in the position we are now in. It was relaxed towards the end of the last Dáil, but a court ruling meant the position was slow to change and we now see the result - a terrible calamity facing many people.

The committee, with the relevant expertise available to it, can make specific recommendations to amend the legislation governing the issue of mortgage to rent and to ensure the courts are given the capacity about which Fr. McVerry spoke to instruct a resolution. Delegates have testified before the committee on the bank veto and when it was called into question and the courts were asked to adjudicate on it, in eight out of 11 cases they found in favour of the debtor. This proves that the legislation in question was flawed. It could have been much better if there

had been adequate scrutiny, debate and information and reasonable proposals had been allowed to be inserted into the legislation at the time. Given the current configuration of the Dáil, an open and frank debate can take place. Ultimately, the Dáil will instruct the Government to act accordingly, but the committee needs relevant professional legal advice to be available to it to make effective recommendations.

Chairman: I remind the Deputy that on 10 May the Master of the High Court came before us.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We had two sessions on this issue.

Deputy Barry Cowen: They did not result in specific recommendations being made by the committee.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There were specific-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: No, they merely gave an opinion on what was taking place. They cannot and are not obliged to do any more, but we, as legislators, are elected to make recommendations to the Dáil. I am not getting sufficient information or advice on the CPO legislation for me to recommend change. The Government, on the other hand, has the Office of the Attorney General and her staff at its disposal.

Chairman: At those meetings advice on the CPO legislation was sought. It might not be sufficient, but this meeting should not be held in isolation from it. It is a matter that we, as a committee, will have to deal with.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I agree with the Deputy, but in a lot of towns CPOs are made for listed buildings. It is a no-brainer for somebody to develop a listed building and if we are to change legislation, we need to look at that issue, too.

Chairman: That is a separate discussion. Deputy Barry Cowen said the committee would need independent legal advice on the constitutionality of this measure. I accept that point, but this issue must be taken with that discussed at a previous meeting at which a number of legal people gave an opinion.

Deputy Michael Harty: To what extent does mental illness contribute to homelessness? Is it a primary cause of homelessness and what effect does homelessness have in precipitating a mental illness? I expect it is a huge problem. Does the trust see a role for the rural resettlement scheme? People can voluntarily move from urban areas, where there are major housing shortages and homelessness to a huge degree, to rural areas where they would have greater acceptance within the community and fit in and be welcomed as an addition to it. They might perhaps have a better quality of life.

Deputy Mary Butler: We are all aware of the work the Peter McVerry Trust does all over the country, on which I compliment it. I note from the spreadsheet submitted that 60% of the people with whom the trust works need support in dealing with mental health issues, while 81% need support in addressing the issue of drug use.

I have a few direct questions for the representatives. First, how is the trust funded? Like all organisations, I am sure it could make use of much more money.

Second, it was stated rent supplement should be increased to a figure of 28%. Do the representatives believe that would have a knock-on effect in driving up rents?

My third question relates to the Housing First model. I come from the Waterford constituency, which has an urban-rural mix. It was stated 21 counties had fewer than 100 homeless persons. Will one of the representatives elaborate on that model as using it would be a good idea to intervene at the level required to prevent the problem from becoming worse?

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I welcome the representatives of the Peter McVerry Trust. I am a great admirer of the work it does. I welcome the clarity it brings to the issue and the points the representatives made.

I agree with the point made about the debate we had with the Master of the High Court. To summarise what he said, there is nothing that cannot be done by the Government if it so decides in the public interest in addressing the issue of homelessness. I agree with what Deputy Barry Cowen said about the provision of legal advice. I think I also said it. If we insert that proposal as a recommendation, we will all stand behind it because it is what has to happen.

I agree with what was said about the Traveller community. What is happening is appalling. It is appalling that some counties have refused, certainly in the past three years, to spend any money on the provision of Traveller accommodation. It is a major issue and it has happened in my county, which I very much regret. We should change the law to provide that members of the Traveller community should not be moved from their accommodation unless there is a better place for them to go to that would better meet their needs.

In my community there is an increasing number of middle-aged males who have separated from their families. They have nowhere to go to and live in very poor accommodation. Some of them have family issues, while others have alcohol problems. In saying this I am not being judgmental. Although they comprise a large cohort, they have a very low priority because they do not have partners or children living with them. However, many of them certainly want to keep in touch with their children and, possibly, their spouse. I do not know if the representatives have thought of this group. They are a separate special cohort whose needs we have to address.

Another issue that concerns me constantly is that of the huge number of people who contact politicians about their need for housing. Because of the numbers involved, the local authorities do not have the capacity to advocate on their behalf. We need advocates for people living in towns and cities who are in need of housing. I am not talking about politicians but individuals who could make a professional assessment of their medical and social needs and so on. A much more integrated approach must be taken. We need to provide a far more professional service for those who are seeking housing. Do the representatives have a view on this? It is an important issue to raise. I do not want people's personal details, but I tell them that if they have a medical issue, they should get their doctor to write not to me but to the council about it. The totality of a family's circumstances is often not articulated and the local authorities are not best placed to understand this because of the pressure they are under.

As I stated earlier this morning, on the 200,000 vacant premises in the State and the 70,000 the Government has stated it wants to be made available through the rental sector, we must encourage such a move. I do not have a problem with a penalty being imposed, although I believe it was said an incentive should be given where it is not done. If we could encourage people with empty houses to sign a five-year lease to make them available under the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme, we might be pushing an open door and the houses could be released to those who need them immediately. I hope in four or five years we will have ramped up the housing construction programme to allow the people concerned to find a permanent home

elsewhere if they so wish. I do not know if the representatives have a view on this suggestion.

Chairman: I thank Deputy O'Dowd. I ask Fr. McVerry and Mr. Doyle to respond to that series of questions and then we will take the final series.

Mr. Pat Doyle: Last year more than 4,700 individuals came through the trust and over 60% of them had a diagnosed mental health problem, were displaying the need for support or had asked for support for a mental health issue. The connection between addiction and mental health is huge and 80% of our client group last year had some form of an addiction. We have a residential detox centre in Naul, County Dublin, and 84 brave people went through that centre last year. For some of them, their mental health issues came out of their addiction while for others, when they detoxed, their mental health issue worsened. They were medicating their mental health through various substances.

Dealing with institutions and homeless services has an impact on people's mental health. We housed a young man five weeks ago in a unit. I will deal with the funding question in more detail in a minute but our budget last year was €14 million, with €9 million coming from the State and the remainder raised by the trust. One of the things we must do to raise that €5 million is sell our souls on a daily basis. On one such day, I was bringing a group of solicitors around one of our housing units and we met the aforementioned homeless man who had been given the key to his door a number of weeks earlier. One of the solicitors asked him how he felt about having his own house and he said he still could not believe it. He also said, "I don't feel I deserve it." For the majority of homeless people, their self-esteem has been damaged and that affects their mental health. Although that man is no longer a client of the trust but is now a tenant, he still does not feel he deserves it. He has seen a lot of his colleagues pass away. We buried 13 of our clients last year and have buried nine so far this year, even though we are not even halfway through 2016. Mental health and addiction are serious issues, as is the damage that being in homeless services inflicts on individuals.

As I said already, our budget is €14 million, €5 million of which we must raise ourselves. If any committee members cycle, they are welcome to cycle to Wexford with us on 17 September next. I will be cycling myself and Peter will be firing the starting gun. We do all sorts of things to raise money and the public are very good to us. They are particularly good about donating for capital projects. Most of our donors feel they do not have a responsibility to fund staff; they believe that is the job of the State but they are quite happy to support capital development.

In the past, the planning departments of local authorities were generally bigger than the housing departments. However, a lot of local authorities have had to do major refurbishment work on their housing departments recently because they have now become bigger than the planning departments. Most of the housing offices now have security staff in place, unfortunately. One can identify the housing departments of local authorities quite easily now because there are generally security staff outside, managing stressed individuals.

We have been able to convince a number of landlords in the private sector to hand over their properties to the trust. They do not have a problem with renting out their properties but are worried about mental health and addiction issues. The local authorities have a role to play, not just in terms of increasing their housing and planning staff but also their social work staff. County Laois, for example, only has one or two social workers for the entire county. We should be building up social supports. Part of the resistance of local authorities to building social housing is not about the building process itself but about managing the individuals being housed. We should build up the social work departments in the local authorities.

Voluntary housing associations also have a role to play in linking with private landlords. In a number of cases, landlords have handed over tenancies to the trust. We have become the landlord and as long as they are getting their monthly rent, the property owners are quite happy.

Fr. Peter McVerry: We deal with a very specific subgroup of the homeless with addiction and mental health problems, primarily. However, we have to remember that 95% of those who are becoming homeless today have only one problem - they do not have the money to pay their rent or the banks have taken their property from them. They do not have any mental health problems. However, if people are homeless for any substantial period of time, they are going to become depressed. Depression is a common feature among homeless people and the families who are living in hotels. Their self-esteem hits rock bottom. Parents have told me that they feel they have failed their children and are bad parents. The public perception is that if people are homeless, there must be something wrong with them. People who become homeless for valid reasons feel that perception. I have heard the story of a family that was living in an hotel bedroom. The members of that family were not allowed to mix with the other residents. They were not allowed to eat in the restaurant. They had to come in the back door because they were not allowed in the front door. They were not allowed to sit in the garden on a lovely sunny day even though all the paying residents were in the garden. When the mother decided to bring the kids for a walk, they had to walk through the garden. As they were doing so, the seven year old boy, seeing a bowl of water, asked "Mammy, why is the dog allowed in the garden and we are not?". That is an example of how people's self-esteem can hit rock bottom. Depression is a very common thing for many homeless people.

I would like to mention that the emergency homeless services are a total disaster. If one wants to get a bed for the night through such services, one must make a telephone call to a free-phone number at 2 p.m. If one calls at 2.02 p.m., one will be told that one is 52nd on the waiting list to speak to somebody. One could be on the telephone for an hour and a half before one gets to speak to somebody. In such circumstances, one is very likely to be told that there are no beds and advised to telephone back at 4.30 p.m. to go through the whole thing again. I ask members to imagine someone with a mental health problem having to do that. People who get emergency accommodation in these circumstances are likely to be put into a hostel full of drug users. The biggest complaint I get from homeless people relates to waking up in the morning after sharing a room with three or four people, only to find that the other people have gone and so have that person's money, runners, mobile telephone and everything else of value.

There is a huge emphasis on having the right number of beds for homeless people to get them off the streets, but there is no discussion about the quality of those beds. The vast majority of emergency beds are of such appalling quality that people feel safer sleeping on the streets. There are three groups of people who will not go into dormitory-type accommodation. People who are drug-free, or have come out of drug treatment, are not willing to share a room with active drug users. Young vulnerable people, many of whom have just come out of care, are terrified of going into these dormitories. Homeless people who were abused as children tell me they break out in a sweat at the thought of sleeping in a dormitory full of strangers. The quality of the emergency accommodation is appalling.

I would like to say quickly that although the rent resettlement scheme has a part to play, it will not deal with more than a tiny minority of families. Very few people in these circumstances want to move out of Dublin because it involves leaving all of their support structures behind. It has been in operation and has been quite successful in many cases. I think it could well be reconstituted.

I am not convinced by the argument that an increase in rent supplement will simply cause rents to increase. The alternative to giving support to somebody on rent supplement is to give it to somebody who is working. Market forces come in here. There is a limit to what someone who is working can afford to pay and a limit to what someone who is working is willing to pay. It has been argued that an increase in rent supplement will automatically lead to an increase in rents. The answer to that is to introduce rent control. The introduction of legislation to allow rents to increase in line with the consumer price index would be a fair solution for landlords and tenants. In such circumstances, an increase in rent supplement would simply allow people who are on rent supplement to compete with others who are working.

The vast majority of people who have separated have no problems. Some people who have separated from their partners are now homeless. We came across a 50 year old sitting on a park bench. He had reared his children and had his own home. He had worked all his life, but lost his job in the recession and subsequently split up from his partner. He was sitting on a park bench at 10.30 p.m. wondering what to do. When he called the freefone number, he was told that there were no beds left and he was invited to come down and get a sleeping bag. He did not have any addiction, alcohol or other problems. It was just that he did not get on with his wife at that stage in his life. In that case, a good samaritan brought him into town and paid for him to stay in a bed and breakfast for the night.

I will conclude by speaking about Traveller accommodation, funding for which was reduced by 85% during the recession. Much of the money that was provided was not even used by the local authorities. Funding for Traveller education was reduced by 90% during the recession. I find those two figures appalling.

Chairman: Does Mr. Doyle wish to conclude on this issue?

Mr. Pat Doyle: Yes, I will refer briefly to two issues, the first of which relates to older people. The Peter McVerry Trust has housed a number of older people of late. As Fr. McVerry pointed out, there are no major stumbling blocks to older people living independently. They need access to housing and the Housing First model is a very good model for achieving this outcome. The individuals in question do not need a large number of wrap-around supports. For example, we recently housed a 60 year old woman who moved into private rented accommodation after her marriage broke down and the family home was sold. The small amount of money she received from the sale of the house was used to supplement the rent she had to pay on a property. Although she had a job, she clearly could not afford the rent and she became homeless when her money ran out. We successfully housed her and she received significant assistance from us in the first week in her new home. She is now living independently, however, and has been given a telephone number at which she can contact us 24 hours per day. A large cohort of people, especially in this older age group, are in a similar position in that they need initial support to access accommodation when a property is sold or one partner needs to remain in the family home when a marriage breaks down.

As Fr. McVerry stated, while the resettlement scheme is small, we had two successful resettlement cases recently, one in County Cavan and one in County Offaly. In one case, two single homeless people who got on well, having met in homeless accommodation, decided they wanted a fresh start outside the capital. They are now in third-level education in County Cavan or County Louth and are getting on grand. Another young couple moved to County Offaly. The major challenge for us will be to secure employment for them as this can be a major problem in some towns. If we can find them employment, they will hold their accommodation and settle well in County Offaly.

Chairman: I will take the final series of questions.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I welcome the witnesses to the committee and thank the Peter McVerry Trust for raising the issue of housing, including radical measures to address the issue. Fr. McVerry was among those who warned long ago about what was coming down the line and the phrase “tsunami of homelessness” continues to resonate.

The submission notes that we have a housing system rather than a housing market. The programme for Government states that the aim of housing policy will be “to create a functioning housing market”. I have a problem with that and I ask the witnesses what their views are on Government policy given that the Peter McVerry Trust has indicated it has a problem with a housing market. Does the trust agree that the Government’s approach to solving what it continues to describe as a “housing shortage” is to make the supply of housing profitable for developers and landlords and that this approach will make it more expensive for first-time buyers, families and people who are renting accommodation? The Government’s philosophy on housing is a problem.

The Peter McVerry Trust notes that three quarters of those on the housing list are accommodated in private rented accommodation. Why is the Government still pursuing this policy? According to the most recent figures, 75% of people on the housing list will continue to be housed in private rented accommodation unless the current approach is changed as a result of the deliberations of the committee. Is it not logical that the current approach would continue given that the aim of the Government is to create a housing market? Do members of the Government and Oireachtas share the same interests as developers and landlords? While we do not have figures on newly elected Deputies, approximately 20% of Deputies are landlords compared to 4% of the general population. As such, landlords are over-represented in the Dáil.

I am pleased the Peter McVerry Trust has raised the issue of compulsory purchase orders and that this issue has found an echo elsewhere. While we do not have time to discuss it in detail, the committee discussed compulsory purchase orders with Mr. Edmund Honohan and Professor P.J. Drudy in two previous sessions. Given that Mr. Honohan’s submission contained 30 points, I do not accept that legal advice is lacking on the issue. Mr. Honohan addressed all the relevant issues, including the public interest and common good. The nub of his argument was that the Supreme Court generally starts with the premise that laws are constitutional. The common good also has considerable legal weight. If the Dáil is not satisfied, it can make clear that there is a fundamental problem and that it is in the common good that housing is supplied. There are ways of proceeding. Deputy Cowen has left but I recall that Mr. Edmund Honohan went through the legal aspects of this chapter and verse. I suppose one will get the legal advice one wants. We all know one can get the legal advice one wants.

The Peter McVerry Trust raised the issue of compulsory purchase orders in terms of vacant properties. What level of compensation should be paid? If we pay the market rate, that would have the effect of rewarding hoarding. The witnesses also raised the issue of vulture funds and called for legislation to prevent financial institutions and local authorities from evicting people into homelessness. Should that be extended to private landlords? The majority of people affected are being evicted into homelessness by private landlords who use the excuse that they have to sell the property, that the grandmother has to move in and so on. Representatives from the Private Residential Tenancies Board and other agencies who appeared before the committee stated that overholding has increased by 50% and evictions have increased from 2010 to 2013 by 137%. It is obvious that some law is needed to protect people in the private rented sector also. I think the legislation should extend also to those people.

On the issue of voids, how many are left? Will the witnesses agree that the Government has been using the voids to mask much of the work it is doing? It is clear from the figures that voids are included in the new housing. They are not new housing. They existed previously but funding was not provided for their refurbishment.

Representatives from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government appeared before the committee on Tuesday last. I raised the issue of why the Department has consistently recommended to the Minister, including last year, not to increase the rent supplement, knowing full well - as the Peter McVerry Trust pointed out in its submission - that the latter has decreased 27% while rents have increased by huge amounts. The Department has played a role in causing the homeless crisis. It seems that the only rent controls have been enforced on the backs of the poorest people.

On the issue of mortgage to rent, while I agree absolutely with the policy I wish to propose another option. The witnesses advocate that the approved housing body buy the mortgage and the State top it up, as it would in the case of HAP or whatever. Should the State-owned banks, such as AIB and Permanent TSB, be asked to write down mortgages as we will end up paying through HAP for a State subsidy for the scheme and more money could be released to the family to spend in the economy which would also help to reduce house prices?

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. I call Deputy Brendan Ryan.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: I thank the representatives from the Peter McVerry Trust for appearing before the committee. Their contribution is very helpful to our work. The trust's recommendations are clear and concise and do not prompt too many questions from me. However, one area of interest to me is that relating to institutional discharges and the trust's recommendation that discharging departments should take responsibility for programmes and, presumably, accommodation needs also. Are the witnesses aware of any international best practice in this area which we could seek to recommend as part of our report?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I thank the witnesses for their very detailed submission. If we were to heed everything in it in order to make matters work, it would be great. Many people have great ideas and many others blame those in government. I listened to much being said about local authorities. It is fair to say that in the past ten years successive Governments have left local authorities with no money for the development of housing. In fairness to local authorities, they have done tremendous work. People can knock and blame local authorities but if those who are driving the housing market to build houses are starved of money, they cannot build. There were many problems following the introduction of the rental accommodation scheme. I appreciate the work done by the Peter McVerry Trust, which does not get enough praise or thanks. Funding is the major issue. We appreciate the matters the trust has highlighted.

Chairman: That concludes questions from members. I wish to make one final point. In one of his first replies, Mr. Doyle referred to the number of voids the Peter McVerry Trust brought back into use last year. He mentioned a figure of 39 or something similar. Will he give us an overview of how the trust identified them and what the process involved? It was innovative and a real solution to the problem.

Mr. Pat Doyle: All of those voids were local authority voids. I would like to correct any misapprehension in regard to our work and say that we support the work of local authorities and work well in partnership with them. I have not met any senior local authority official who was not dedicated to solving the housing crisis. However, the committee is right that resources and

backing are significant issues for the local authorities.

The 39 voids we identified were all in Dublin, unfortunately. We identified some in Limerick where we also operate, but we have not got them over the line yet. One complex we identified for example is Hogan Court in Dublin. Our staff are constantly pulling in and taking photographs of buildings while scouting around every day and we then approach our local authority colleagues. The first building we worked on was in Pim Street. It had been a six-unit local authority building for 30 years, five two-bedroom units and one one-bedroom unit. The local authority had handed over the building to an approved housing body in the early 2000s, but that housing body let the building go because of a management issue and handed it back to the council, leaving one couple remaining in the building. All of the other units were boarded up, leaving that couple very vulnerable.

We asked the local authority to give the property to us and we then went out and looked for a donor. We got a donor through a foundation, a building construction company set up as a foundation which built housing mainly in Africa and Asia. It had never done that work in Ireland. We were the first group anywhere in the British Isles to have the funding directed this way rather than to Africa or Asia. The company was doing the type of work being done in Haiti. We applied to the company and it gave us €100,000 and we matched that with €24,000 of our own funding and renovated the six units in approximately 22 weeks. We made an excellent video of the work and it is on our YouTube clip. We put one Housing First client into one of the six units, somebody straight from the streets. We took two young people from care who had been condemned into homeless services after they left care and took people for the remainder of the units from the housing lists. All of this was agreed with the local authority and all those we took were registered with the local authority.

We see this work as a real partnership with the housing authority. It owned the building. We did not need to own it. The local authority leased it to us, but has not transferred it to us. I am on the housing strategic policy committee, SPC, and I know a number of colleagues on the councils do not want to see housing stock transferred to voluntary housing associations. I am of the view we do not need to own the property. We had a lease that was long enough to allow the funder invest with us and we have given full-time tenancies to six people. We have repeated that good practice process since, particularly in regard to how quickly we have turned property around, which has increased the local authority's confidence in us to provide units.

The challenge for approved housing bodies is to prove they can provide homes and do it well, quickly and cost-efficiently. Following Pim Street, we identified a building in Hogan Court with 11 units and we turned them around in 12 weeks. We secured all the funding for that initiative from the Construction Industry Federation. That accounted for their social corporate responsibility for 2015 and we had the units open for Christmas.

Another partnership followed a call from Government last year for public bodies to make good any properties they had that were not in use. We identified eight units the OPW owned. These had been a compulsory purchase for an extension of the National Art Gallery but capital funding collapsed following the crisis and the OPW had been sitting on the units for a number of years. We have taken over those units on a ten-year lease. We have refurbished them in conjunction with Dublin City Council and the Housing Agency and now have eight homeless people in them. One of those is a lad straight from the streets, the lad I mentioned who said he still cannot believe he is in housing. A number of the tenants have come from care and the rest have come from the homeless priority housing list. We will maintain and support the units and the individuals in them to ensure they keep their tenancies.

Going back to what Deputy Ruth Coppinger was saying, we do not support the eviction of anybody from any unit. The trust has a policy whereby we do not evict. All homeless service providers have now bought into that policy in Dublin. What we look for is resettlement rather than eviction. Sometimes people will cause considerable damage and annoyance and perhaps make threats to other tenants such that it is not feasible for them to stay in that location. Everybody else around them might have to move out. What we say all the time is that there should be a resettlement programme rather than an eviction. We have had some very difficult cases, but the trust has never evicted anybody. As Fr. McVerry said, we are dealing with a very small number of people who have very complex needs. The vast majority of housing providers, including voluntary housing associations, deal with the general public. There should not be evictions. We do not support them.

There are different philosophies as to how we deal with the banks. As the Deputy said, we could write down the loan. Why not? The other option would be to sell AIB. I am not saying I would support taking that option; I am just stating the different arguments. We could sell AIB for €20 billion which we could ring-fence to house the most vulnerable and marginalised. I would be inclined to support the writing down of loans. Ulster Bank, for example, is going to write down loans taken over by a vulture fund. We should keep people in the houses in which they are living.

Fr. Peter McVerry: Let me take up a couple of the points made. Private landlords evicting into homelessness is a special situation. The last Government introduced legislation to prevent landlords from using the excuse that they were selling the house. They now have to produce proof that they are selling it, or that their granny is going to move in, before they can evict. However, the private rental sector needs to be re-regulated. Although I am not used to defending landlords, I do know some who have had great problems with a tenant; there might be anti-social behaviour or a tenant might not have paid the rent for 12 months. We cannot expect landlords not to evict such tenants into homelessness. There is a need for a process of re-regulation to protect landlords as well as tenants before we have a blanket ban on landlords evicting people into homelessness.

The Department of Social Protection has argued that no one has become homeless as a result of the failure to increase rent supplement. That is absolutely and totally untrue. I know that there is a scheme which operates on a case-by-case basis. A family can go to Threshold and apply for the supplement and they may or may not get it. Most of the families with whom we deal who are evicted for non-payment of rent have never heard of Threshold and do not know about this system. They simply receive a notice from the landlord that the rent is going up; they have no way of paying it and end up being moved out. It is a guesstimate, but at least 2,000 families have become homeless as a result of the failure of the Department of Social Protection to increase rent allowance in the past couple of years.

I am not sure what happens in other jurisdictions when people leave prison. In England there is access to private rented accommodation. We had one lad from Ireland who was in prison in England. In November he rang me to say he was being discharged in February. They already had accommodation organised for him and were going to have two weeks' social welfare payments for him at the gate of the prison when he was leaving. They also had a place for him on a training course. If somebody is in prison for 12 months or two years, we have enough time to organise something, but in Ireland those leaving prison do not even have a medical card. This is causing huge problems. I spend most of my weekends in the prisons. It is also a guesstimate, but there are 40 to 50 people in prison who would be discharged in the morning if

they had somewhere to go to. They may be eligible for bail or temporary release but are in custody because they do not have an address. They are being kept in prison at enormous expense because we have failed to provide for them.

We need to declare a national emergency. This is an emergency which requires a multi-agency response. The Minister with responsibility for housing is powerless without the co-operation of the Departments of Finance, Social Protection and Health, the local authorities, NAMA and the approved housing bodies. Unless they all come up with a plan that they can buy into and support, the Minister's hands are tied. The only way that can happen is for the Taoiseach to declare an emergency, which he would do if there was an outbreak of foot and mouth disease in the morning, get all of the relevant bodies around a table and agree on a plan to which all of them must adhere. The Taoiseach would make sure that those plans were being implemented at weekly meetings.

Chairman: I am going to be very tolerant. Deputy Durkan has a brief point to make but he should not push it.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I just need to correct something. I have the greatest respect for Deputy Coppinger and for her ideology. However, I do not believe that we can solve the housing crisis with a dose of ideology. Many of us on this committee remember the time when we were able to solve all of these housing crises without any reference to radicalism, as suggested by Deputy Coppinger. I do not know how many Members of the Oireachtas are landlords. That is not my function and not my business.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is listed under Members' interests.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: It may well be but I do not sniff around Members' interests to any great extent because I look after my own interests-----

Chairman: Good.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Well, I know-----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: -----as best I can. I am not a landlord.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Deputy is listed as one.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: If I am, I am incorrectly listed. I wish to correct something, Chairman. I am not a landlord.

Chairman: That is now on the-----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Suggesting otherwise is totally incorrect and it is wrong to try to create an impression that is incorrect.

Chairman: Deputy Durkan-----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Let me finish. The matter was raised.

Chairman: I afforded you an opportunity to speak because you had a point you wished to-----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am dealing with the point, Chairman.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Will we all get a chance to debate this now?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I wish to mention that I totally agree with the response of Fr. Peter McVerry and the Peter McVerry Trust. I commend the work they have done. I totally agree with them and there is no doubt about it. However, we have a housing emergency and the Taoiseach has indicated that we have a specified time within which to deal with it. He has indicated that he will drive it himself, along with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and the other responsible, constituent bodies. I believe that is the way it should be.

Chairman: I said “a brief point”, Deputy.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I did not set out to start a political argument about this but since somebody wants to start one, I am up for it too. Do not forget that.

Chairman: Deputy Wallace has a brief point.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I will be very brief. I wish to commend the Peter McVerry Trust on the wonderful work it is doing. I am glad it is making use of some units that I built in Russell Street.

Mr. Pat Doyle: I was going to say that. I thank the Deputy very much. They are fabulous units.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: I have a brief point in relation to Fr. Peter McVerry’s-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It was the building workers who built the units, actually.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: I have a brief point in relation to Fr. McVerry’s comment about the-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I believe the building workers built them.

Deputy Mick Wallace: God help us.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: I have a brief point in relation to Fr. McVerry’s comments about the rent supplement and about it driving people into homelessness. My own experience is a bit different. I have found that where rents are going up and people have gone to the community welfare officer, flexibility is granted inside or outside the threshold protocol. That is generally the case. Representatives of the Department of Social Protection appeared before the committee the other day and indicated that there were about 8,000 cases in which they increased the granted amount beyond the caps. Fr. McVerry’s experience is not universal.

Chairman: I wish to make one point. Fr. McVerry mentioned landlords selling properties and notice being given to the sitting tenant. I fail to understand why notice would be given at all. If it was a commercial property, whatever the tenancy agreement was would reside with the property. If there was a tenant in a commercial property and it was being sold, the tenant and the tenancy would go with the property. I fail to understand how every time a property goes for sale, it seems to have to be vacant. What is causing real pressure on it is when receivers are appointed. The first thing they do is clear the property rather than try to sell it as a going concern with tenants - as a business. Fr. McVerry might not like it being described as a business. I believe it is appalling that the first thing done by a receiver is the removal of the tenant from the property. If it was a commercial property, the tenancy would continue to reside there. I fail to understand why that is not the normal practice for residential tenancies.

Mr. Pat Doyle: The Peter McVerry Trust has been a victim of that as well. We had properties on lease and they wanted vacant possessions. That is what we are saying about the Ulster Bank loans - the vulture funds will want the properties to be empty. We have overcrowded hotel accommodation and very little private rented accommodation.

Chairman: I fully support that.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Chairman is very fair but people coming in here to score political points is what has got us into the mess we are in today. Everyone should be here in the best interests of the homeless so they should not come in and use the committee as a place to score political points. There is no room in this committee for that.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Hear, hear.

Chairman: We will conclude the session. I thank Mr. Friel, Mr. Doyle, Mr. Doherty and Fr. McVerry for their attendance, their submissions to the committee and their direct and frank answers. They have been very helpful to the committee.

Sitting suspended at 12.55 p.m. and resumed at 2 p.m.

Focus Ireland

Chairman: I draw the attention of members and witnesses to housekeeping notices. I ask members and witnesses to switch their mobile phones off or to flight mode as they cause interference not only during, but in the recording and broadcasting of, our proceedings. I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2008, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to this committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence in relation to a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. The opening statements submitted to the committee will be published on the committee's website after the meeting. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I welcome Mr. Ashley Balbirnie and Mr. Mike Allen, the representatives of Focus Ireland. Their submission has been circulated to members and will be published on the committee's website afterwards. I invite Mr. Balbirnie to make his opening statement and I will then open the meeting to colleagues for questions.

Mr. Ashley Balbirnie: I am the chief executive of Focus Ireland and have been in office for just over a year. My colleague, Mr. Mike Allen, director of advocacy, will probably be much more familiar to a number of the members. I thank the members of the committee for the invitation to make a direct presentation to them on the housing and homelessness crisis that confronts us. I commend them on their work to date, the range of submissions they have heard and their close and detailed questioning around the key issues. Focus Ireland has long called for homelessness to be treated as a political priority and the hard work and diligence of this committee is

a practical expression of what being treated as a political priority looks like. This work has been given added significance by the publication of the programme for Government, which includes a commitment to produce an action plan for housing within 100 days of the Government being formed. We welcome this and also the commitment to arrive at the plan through a collaborative process. We see this meeting as an important element in that collaboration.

Focus Ireland has made a comprehensive submission to the committee which covers a number of the issues that need to be addressed. As we note in the submission, a comprehensive strategy designed to bring an end to homelessness would include a wider range of measures related to general poverty, mental health, the justice system and support for young people who grew up in care. We do not want these issues to be forgotten but we consider the approach of the committee to be reasonable in the present circumstances, that is, to concentrate on the immediate crisis which confronts us and is driven primarily by a severe shortage of affordable housing.

Focus Ireland, formed over 30 years ago by Sr. Stan, is one of the leading homeless organisations in Ireland with a presence in most parts of the country. We run a range of services from providing long-term homes for people who need ongoing support, through tenancy sustainment, training, and advice and information. The core of our work is in the areas of preventing homelessness and supporting people to exit homelessness and while we work with anyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness, we have a particular recognised expertise in the areas of families, young people and Housing First. We are the designated housing action team for the homeless families in the four Dublin local authority areas and, on behalf of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, DRHE, we provide case management support to families across the city. Our submission is based on the front-line experience of our staff across the country, supporting over 12,500 people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness during the last year.

While we are more than happy to take any questions arising from any aspect of our submission or, indeed, any other dimension of our work or advocacy which is of interest to the committee, bearing in mind the committee has heard many submissions and covered many aspects of this issue already, we want to use our time here, if we may, to concentrate on one aspect as we thought our time would be best spent by doing that. The area we would like to concentrate on is the importance of preventing homelessness, in particular family homelessness. We want to concentrate on prevention because if we do not do something to slow down the flow of families into homelessness, the system will move from crisis point to breaking point and significant damage will be done to many lives while we wait for the longer-term solutions to kick in.

The numbers are stark. I refer the committee to the two tables in my submission. In terms of the official figures for families who are accommodated in emergency accommodation nationally, no official figures are available prior to June 2014 but from other work that Focus Ireland undertook at the time, we estimate that approximately 150 families were homeless in February 2013. One can see the movement in the figures since then, with the official figures showing 291 families in June 2014, moving through last year, with the figures rising all the time, to now over 1,000 families and, crucially, over 2,000 dependants - children - in homelessness. As I said, I joined Focus Ireland just over a year ago and shortly after I joined, the number of children topped over 1,000. At that time, there was significant commotion and media interest in it, that it had sort of magically passed this figure of 1,000, and the ISPCC, Children's Rights Alliance or others were rightly extremely vocal on the subject. I stress that the number is now twice that, at over 2,000 dependants, but comparatively, I would say there has been hardly a murmur, even though those figures have doubled in just over a year. We believe it is truly scary.

The second table shows the growth in the number of newly homeless families in Dublin

over a slightly longer period, dating back to the start of 2013. Crucially, the point we would make out of the second table is that there has been a doubling in the average number of families each successive year. There were on average 15 families in 2013, 34 in 2014, 62 in 2015 and 92 in 2016 to date. The crucial question we would ask is what is fundamentally changing that will stop that continuing because we and others involved in the DRHE area are struggling so hard to contain the numbers as they stand at present. We all are having difficulty in seeing how we can cope with those increased figures.

There is an understandable temptation to focus on the emergency side of the issue in the short term. Members of the committee will be familiar with our criticisms of the quality of some emergency accommodation, the long distances from schools, the absence of cooking and washing facilities, etc. These are extremely important criticisms and much more needs to be done to ensure a consistently acceptable quality of emergency accommodation. However, it is also important to recognise the achievement of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive in rapidly scaling up its provision for homeless families and responding to a crisis that was once unpredicted by official sources, grew at an unprecedented rate and is caused by factors largely beyond its control. I again refer to families. Organisations such as the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, Focus Ireland, Peter McVerry Trust and others are trying to budget on the basis of a figure from one year but are dealing with double that figure the next. I am not sure in what context that is possible.

We wish to signal clearly to the committee that there comes a time when a problem reaches a scale at which one simply runs out of available hotel rooms and bed and breakfast accommodation. We are approaching that point. We do not believe there are proposals to provide a significant number of new homes that will bear fruit in the next six to eight months and that, at the current rate of growth, the current rate of provision will suffice. There is nothing to indicate that it is. We need to start providing very different emergency accommodation, well below what is now considered acceptable, which clearly is not an option, or be very much better at preventing people from losing their homes.

Members will have heard earlier this week about a number of families who had to be accommodated on blow-up beds in offices or accommodation for single adults because it was past midnight and no emergency beds could be found for them. We are running out of language to describe this. If a hotel room is “emergency accommodation”, what do we call a room in an adult hostel that is used when the supply of emergency accommodation has run out? What do we call the offices we use when the “beyond emergency rooms” have run out? We tend to call them “a place of safety”. That cold, technical title does not convey the anxiety and fear children must feel late at night when they are finally offered such a place, but perhaps it does make clear the level of risk if we ever reach a night in which we have run out of places of safety. That is the reason we need members to concentrate on this issue. If I had but one message for the committee today, it would be that we have to address the prevention issue and stop the flow into homelessness in some shape or form. Otherwise, we will just keep throwing more money at bigger and bigger numbers to try to turn back a tide that must be tackled at its source.

My colleague, Mr. Allen, will now outline some of the specific measures we have outlined in the submission, although not all, members will be pleased to hear. He will pick out some that might be of relevance and note to the committee.

Mr. Mike Allen: I wish to concentrate on a few areas concerning prevention and perhaps a couple of other points. We are concentrating a lot on the area in which we have the highest level of direct experience, namely, family homelessness. Ours is the lead organisation in that area.

It is important to realise that almost all of the families entering homelessness services had their last homes in the private rental sector. Therefore, there is considerable concern about owner-occupiers and the problems they experience, including mortgage arrears. However, virtually none of these families has ended up in homelessness services. They may be homeless in more general senses in some cases but virtually none enters homelessness services. This should not be regarded as a reason for complacency. If the purpose of public policy in recent years was to prevent owner-occupiers in arrears from becoming homeless, it has been an outstanding success. We should leave that as it is, but it is worth noting some of the reasons. I am not saying there are still not considerable problems in this area owing to indebtedness and the stress on families, but their problem is not formal homelessness.

In the private rental sector, which is essentially from where the homeless families are coming, the two factors which are driving people out are the increase in rent levels and evictions of one sort or another. Unless we are able to tackle these two issues, we will see a continual increase in the number of families being pushed out of the private rental sector into homelessness services.

With regard to rent levels, there are two things one can do. The first involves doing something to moderate the increase in rent levels through rent certainty in some form or rent moderation legislation. We have always advocated that this be done, either in the short term or the longer term, by linking rents with the consumer price index. Some elements in the last Government tried to achieve this, but the Government used a different mechanism which, predictably, did not have the effect required. This was because there was not the political will right across government. Political will is crucial in how these matters are dealt with.

The other way of dealing with the issue is to increase the amount of money in the pockets of those who are being forced out. Virtually every one of the families who have become homeless were, on the last occasion on which they lived in private rented accommodation, in receipt of rent supplement. As such, there is no escaping the fact that the inadequacy of rent supplement levels is a driving force for pushing families into homelessness. That said, we do not believe any of these is a simple solution. There is no simple answer to these things and there are unintended consequences for every action one might take. We argued several years ago that rent supplement should be increased in line with market rents but nothing was done. They have fallen so far behind now that to get families back into accommodation, we are regularly paying 60% to 70% above the rent supplement level to get housing assistance payments under the homeless HAP scheme because we were not willing to pay them an adequate level of rent supplement earlier on. There are ways to deal with rent supplement which go beyond the Threshold intervention. The metaphor I use is that it is as if the entire roof has blown off and the rain is pouring in but Threshold and the Department of Social Protection are running around asking if anyone is getting wet and just putting a bucket there. One can say Threshold's rent supplement measure is successful because it has prevented a number of people from becoming homeless but one must also look at the fact that every month since it was introduced, the number of families becoming homeless has continued to rise.

People are also losing their accommodation through evictions. We very strongly argue for an improvement in tenants' rights, in particular in regard to the loophole whereby a tenancy can be ended if the landlord wants to sell the property. Legislation could be used to fix that up. A final area in that regard involves the policing of the rules that exist. Currently, if a family becomes homeless because the landlord says he is selling his property or his niece is moving in, the tenant goes to the local authority which assesses him or her as homeless. The tenant gives

that as the reason but nobody from the local authority goes to the address and finds out if it is actually true. The committee members have passed all this legislation creating all this protection but nobody polices it. It is left to the family that has been made homeless which has other things on its minds to raise it as an issue. It is a simple measure to simply have a trigger for the legislation whereby somebody would go out, check and compile a report to say whether the property is being sold or is for let again.

As a result of the crisis we are in, there are a lot of things that need to be done here which are not very attractive. One of the proposals we put forward and which we draw to the attention of members is as follows. A number of families who lose their secure homes go to live with wider family for a period of time. After that breaks down due to overcrowding or, sometimes, because the local authority says the family cannot live there due to overcrowding, the family goes to homeless services. A proportion of those families could be supported to live in that broader family for a longer period. They call it “doubling up” in the State’s homeless services. However, they would have to hold their position on the homeless list and they would have to have a case manager from the Focus Ireland team so that they did not lose out. We put that proposal forward a few weeks ago, albeit the political system has been busy. However, we think there is a significant if not a huge amount of strain that could be taken off families in the system by doing that.

There are three other areas I wish to mention which move away from the prevention area. The first is research and evaluation. Ireland spends an enormous and increasing amount of money on homeless services. It spends no money on evaluating the effectiveness of the measures it introduces. Focus Ireland spends a significant amount of the money we raise on evaluating our services but the State spends nothing. Recently, we had a brilliant talk from a Canadian researcher which set out that 10% of a project’s money was spent on research. We are not saying 10% should be spent, or even that it should be 1%, but if the committee as part of its report recommended that 0.1% of the homelessness budget should be ring-fenced for research and evaluation to be carried out by the Housing Agency, it would begin to make a big difference in us being able to see what works and what does not.

The second issue of the three I wish to mention is about under-26s. I might have missed it in the discussion but the particular problems faced by under-26s who are unemployed and not care leavers have not been mentioned. They are on reduced-rate social welfare payments. If they are not able to return to their families or do not have families to which to return and have lost their homes, they are undoubtedly going to remain homeless until they turn 27. It is an outrageous situation and we are creating the rough sleepers of the future by doing that. A number of measures could be taken to deal with that.

We are very disappointed the Government has so far not decided to continue the enhanced allocations of social housing to homeless households. As members know, the former Minister, Deputy Kelly, introduced a protocol in which 50% of housing units in Dublin, and 30% elsewhere, went to households that were homeless or otherwise disadvantaged. That directive has ceased to operate and has not been continued, which closes off a very important exit from homelessness, given that Cathal Morgan said 1,000 households had moved out of homelessness as a result of that measure.

We know very well it is unpopular, and is particularly unpopular with public representatives. It is taking from people who are pretty poor and giving it to people who are extraordinarily poor. I accept that is not how one would want to run society but in the crisis we are in, if we do not reintroduce that regulation, we will see the numbers of families in homeless accom-

modation go beyond the number of hotel rooms we have in this city, as Mr. Balbirnie said. During this week, our housing intake team, which we run jointly with the Peter McVerry Trust, was working with a family after midnight and could not get them accommodation. Team members phoned 149 hotels in the Dublin area and in all the counties around Dublin before they finally found somewhere to put up that family. What a waste of their time, what a stress on the family and what an indication of how close to breaking point we are.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Balbirnie and Mr. Allen for what was a very focused presentation. Although the issue of housing and homelessness is broad and complex, they focused, in particular, on the issue of prevention. My colleagues, in their questions, might also focus on this area because it is one in which Mr. Balbirnie and Mr. Allen have considerable expertise.

Deputy Michael Harty: One statistic that struck me in reading the presentation was that 34% of homeless are migrants - 17% from within the EU and 17% from outside the EU. The witnesses might comment on that.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I must declare an interest in that I am a former employee of Focus Ireland and Mr. Allen was my line manager.

Chairman: Do not be too hard on him.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I told him I would heckle him but I probably will not do that. I have noticed that the length of time families are spending in emergency accommodation in Dublin city and county is increasing. We had found it was about 12 months in Dublin city and six or seven months in south Dublin but it is now hitting 12 months and more in south Dublin and 18 to 24 months in Dublin city. Does Focus Ireland have any figures on the length of time families are in emergency accommodation?

There is an increasing number of families for whom there is no emergency accommodation on any given day and, therefore, those families are either forced to over-hold on private rental accommodation where they have notices to quit, or the family has to split up and make very difficult arrangements, such as multiple sofa surfing among family and friends. Is this something Focus Ireland has experience of and will the witnesses comment on it?

I was not aware the 50% priority allocation was no longer being followed by the four Dublin local authorities, although I knew it had not been extended. My understanding was the local authorities were still applying it but if that is not the case, the witnesses might clarify this.

On rent supplement, one of the issues some of us are grappling with is that if there is an across-the-board increase in rent supplement, at some stage the private rental market is going to absorb that into its overall calculation of rents. I am in favour of the increase in rent supplement to market levels for the reasons given by the witnesses. Has Focus Ireland taken a position on the issue of rent certainty in order to try to provide a cap at the other end? If so, what is its preferred model of rent certainty?

I want to raise the issue of standards in emergency accommodation, particularly for children. Given the fact we are seeing an increasing number of families entering emergency accommodation, have the witnesses specific recommendations in terms of how to improve the quality of that emergency accommodation? I know the focus is on prevention but I would still be keen to hear their views on that matter, particularly as the organisation's focus is on families that are homeless.

Mr. Mike Allen: I missed the Deputy's final question.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: One of the issues for many of the families being placed in emergency accommodation is the unsuitability of that accommodation, particularly for children. That is the case in respect of both hotels and hostels. Do the representatives from Focus Ireland have any comments or recommendations on that?

Chairman: If the witnesses would like to address those two matters, I will then take a few more questions.

Mr. Ashley Balbirnie: I will take the rent supplement question first because this is a subject close to our heart. I know there are two lines of thought on this. At the end of the day, rent supplement is a mechanism which people clearly think has a place in the system. The last increase in rent supplement was in June 2013. Rents have gone up in the region of 35% - certainly in the Dublin area - in the meantime. If rent supplement has a role to play, the amount of the supplement obviously must relate to what the market rent is. It is unfortunate that there has been such a time lag and that such a gap has built up because we now cannot be as positive as we would like to be about the 15% increase being talked about at the moment. It is necessary and a good thing, as far as we are concerned, but a hell of a gap has opened up.

Chairman: What does Mr. Balbirnie mean by 15%? I apologise for interrupting but he quite clearly said that in 2013 it was set. We are three years down the road and Mr. Balbirnie has indicated that the market has grown by 30% or 35%. Will a 15% increase address the issue at all?

Mr. Ashley Balbirnie: It is worth doing and will play a positive role but not to the extent that we would like. One of the arguments was that rent increases are driven or partly impacted upon by increases in rent supplement. I return to the point that there has been a 35% increase - with zero increase in rent supplement - so I am not sure from where that argument comes. The 15% increase is positive. We would like to be warmer about it than we are, but that is purely because of the time lag. It is certainly still worth doing.

Mr. Mike Allen: To answer the question, one of the complexities in working out the implications is that it is certainly our belief that there is virtually no household in the country on rent supplement that is not paying a top-up. The Department of Social Protection says that it has never come across anybody paying a top-up. When people from Tyrrelstown came before the committee, however, one of them admitted to paying a top-up. The immediate response of the Department of Social Protection should have been to withdraw rent supplement and render the person homeless. I hope it did not do that, but we are in this complete hypocrisy of not knowing what is going on. No research has been done by the Department; it just asserts this. The risk, if one increases rent supplement by 15% or anything else, is whether it will be absorbed by reducing the top-up or whether the top-up will remain the same and the rent will increase. That is the dynamic that one does not really know.

At the moment, it is essentially not a crime but, rather, a breach of the rules by the tenant, for which he or she will suffer if he or she pays the top-up, but it is completely commonplace among landlords to do it and there is no penalty for their doing it. Therefore, some sort of greater penalisation, for want of a better word, of the landlords' accepting top-ups as part of the rent supplement package is one issue that could be considered. However, the longer-term solution must be the move to HAP. We have signalled a concern that the way the State is getting around this problem is that top-ups are now considered legitimate in HAP in many areas,

thereby forcing tenants well below the poverty line.

Specifically on Deputy Ó Broin's question, we support rent certainty and the linking of rents to the consumer price index as the most appropriate index - not in an absolutist fashion if there are better ways to proceed - but that is what would work most effectively.

As the Deputy knows, it is very hard to get detailed information on duration of stay in emergency accommodation. However, we are examining the position of the families who would have been homeless when the directive issued by the former Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, first came into place in December 2014. Of those families, the total number who were homeless then and are still in the system is in the region of 60. Some of them have come and gone over that period but approximately 60 are still homeless some 15 months later. It is worth informing the committee that Focus Ireland started a programme in 2011 working with all the families who were long-term homeless at the time. There were 137 homeless families in Dublin at the time. As part of the project we moved all of them out of homelessness into secure accommodation. The crisis started with almost a clean sheet, which is something for which we should be grateful.

On the directed figure of 50%, the problem is that we know that local authorities are obliged to do it, but the figures and data which are published slowly and painfully show that most local authorities are having huge difficulties in achieving the figure of 50%, even with the directive in place. It might take a very long time for us to find out what their allocations policies are in the absence of such a directive. As an interim measure, we would probably settle for the publishing of data and then see where there was a problem.

The quality of the emergency accommodation provided is of huge concern. As we stated in our presentation, it must be set alongside recognition of the enormous challenge the local authorities' homelessness executive had in scaling up the response and the impossibility sometimes of finding any decent room. If we are looking at a situation in the coming two to five years where a significant number of families are still homeless, the questions of the quality of the accommodation in which they are living and its proximity to schools will need to be strongly addressed. As we put it, we need to support these families to remain resilient while they are homeless without doing things which would turn them into being homeless. That is a big challenge for the system.

We do not necessarily have the level of data or information we would like on the proportion of homeless persons who are migrants. The Regional Homeless Executive is examining this issue and we will also do so. There is a mixture of circumstances, including families who have been in Ireland for considerable periods. According to the 2011 census, an extraordinary number of non-Irish people were living in private rented accommodation. Therefore, it is not surprising that a reasonably high percentage of them are affected by a crisis in the private rented sector. In fact, the percentage is quite low considering where they were living when the crisis took place.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I welcome the delegates. I will take up the point on migrants because one in four people in the constituency I represent was born outside Ireland. Ours is the most diverse constituency. I wager that it has the highest level of homelessness in the country. I have been informed the Threshold helpline is mainly rung by people in the west and north Dublin area, but we also have the figures for homelessness in Dublin and Fingal. Most of those who are homeless in Fingal are in the greater Blanchardstown area.

With regard to migrants, I suggested we needed to bring people before the committee to testify directly about their homelessness. One of the families I had in mind was an African family. Last year I held a meeting in my constituency office with ten homeless families from the area, five of whom were not Irish. Non-Irish people are being hit disproportionately by homelessness. The reason is, as Mr. Allen stated, that they are mainly reliant on the private rented sector, which is the cause and curse of all homelessness, and do not really have the same supports as others if they become homeless such as staying with friends. It is a real issue.

Another issue I want to raise is the absolute sin of self-accommodation, whereby people are sent by the local authority to find their own accommodation. This is bad enough if one is Irish, but if one is not Irish, it is even worse because there are potential language difficulties. The delegates might comment on what they come across in this regard because it has not yet been discussed at the committee.

I want to take up Mr. Allen's points about prevention of homelessness. I agree that it is the first thing on which the committee has to make recommendations. There is vital legislation which needs to be introduced and enacted.

Rent supplement is a cause of homelessness. Mr. Allen has stated the inflexibility of the Department is leading to homelessness. We must nail this. The State, through its intransigence, is making people homeless. When officials from the Department appeared before us recently, I referred to Mr. Allen's assertion that this was universal. Last year or in 2014, the then Minister, Deputy Burton, stated that there was no evidence of it being universal. I made the point that it was the only fraud being committed in social welfare about which the Department did not want to know anything. The reason for this is that the Department knows that people are only defrauding themselves and, therefore, it does not care. Sitting across from us, the officials from the Department stated that it had a more caring and sharing attitude and that if people approached them about their top-ups, it would help them, so let us see if that happens.

Will the witnesses briefly explain why discretionary uplifts will not work, that is, people telephoning and being given something on a nudge-nudge basis? One reason for it not working is that, as the Peter McVerry Trust told us, not everyone knows about these matters. There is an assumption that everyone who becomes homeless is reading legal textbooks and whatever the Department issues on a daily basis. Many do not and are intimidated and frightened. They are not used to getting help and do not know how to get any. I am amazed that people are walking out of houses in which they could have stayed.

I wish to ask about one of Focus Ireland's recommendations, the abolition of ending leases so that properties might be sold, but only where the landlord owns more than one property. I have an issue with this. According to DKM Economic Consultants in 2014, two thirds of landlords owned only one property each. Why must a tenant who is unlucky enough to be with a one-property landlord become homeless, unlike someone whose landlord owns more than one property? If Focus Ireland wants to prevent homelessness, it must advocate this recommendation across the board. Otherwise, the haemorrhage will continue.

I welcome that Focus Ireland highlighted what I have been calling the Baker judgment, which people probably do not realise is what has saved the Tyrrelstown tenants from eviction thus far. They approached the Residential Tenancies Board to make a challenge. We will use other grounds in time, but the judgment is saving many people from homelessness. We made this proposal to the RTB before Christmas, but it was voted down. One must demonstrate that one has made efforts to sell one's property, for example, contacting an estate agent. One cannot

just claim that one is selling the property at which point the tenants must leave. Focus Ireland is asking the Government to legislate properly for this. That is critical, as people need to know that they have this support.

Regarding the point made on one property versus multiple properties, I understand why Focus Ireland has included this clause. I am sure that there are cases of people who would be in great hardship if they could not get their own houses back. I assume that this is why Focus Ireland is making the proposal. We all know people who have needed to move in with their parents because they could not afford to live in the houses that they bought in the bubble era. Different actions need to be taken on that front. For example, there should have been a mortgage write-down, which would have ended many of our problems. If one could prove financial hardship, amendments could be made instead of simply referring to only those with multiple properties.

My final point is on what Focus Ireland called the fatal reliance on the private rental sector in the Government's housing policy. I do not have time to go into all of the figures, as I have gone into many previously. What are the views of the witnesses on the Government's targets and figures? It is a broad question, but the Government has a target of 9,000 Part V units by 2020. This is based on 25,000 general private units being built every year, but last year only half of that amount was built. Most were one-off housing that could not have provided any Part V housing. I will be kind and diplomatic, since one is not allowed to say that the Government is "lying", but the figures do not stand up in any way. I would be interested in the views of the witnesses-----

Chairman: The Deputy has asked her questions.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: They are important questions.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. Before we come to the witnesses, we will take the other member who has indicated. Does Deputy Durkan have a question?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank our guests for attending this meeting and compliment them on the work they are doing and have done for many years. As in the case of all the other witnesses who have appeared before the committee, it is good to engage with people dealing at the coalface with an issue on a daily basis, as opposed to getting information second-hand, of which there is a great deal.

I understand that Focus Ireland recently had a meeting with the Taoiseach at which it rightly set out its priorities. I believe its requests will be responded to. It is only proper that this should be the case in the context of the current housing emergency. When an emergency is not addressed it escalates.

A few issues come to mind. We need to arrest the rate at which homelessness is hitting the market. If we do not do so now the problem will escalate. This issue can be addressed through a multiplicity of approaches, including modular house provision, the purchase of existing houses, the use of suitable NAMA houses and the dedication of the various local authorities. In this regard it has come to my attention that because of an over-reliance over the past ten or 15 years on the private sector to deal with the housing situation the tendency among local authorities has been to not hold a land bank. This lack of land banks is now a serious issue in the context of available land on which to build emergency housing, modular housing and so on.

There is another issue that is equally important. There is a certain anonymity in regard to

how the current housing situation is being dealt with. Members here who are former members of the local authorities will know that previously officials in the local authorities knew everything that needed to be known about individual applicants, including their particular circumstances and their health circumstances. Public representatives were equally well versed in that regard. This tended to push applications towards resolution in a much quicker way than has been the case in recent times. Nowadays there is anonymity in the system with one name on a screen surpassing another as a more serious problem arises. However, we can deal with those cases separately. It is vital that we try to arrest the speed at which people are being evicted and becoming homeless. We must do all we can to prevent this, including instructing people not to vacate their houses.

I am not fully convinced about the need to increase rent support. I recently dealt with a case in respect of which the rent has increased by 100% in the past month. That is not an isolated case. There are many landlords who have a social conscience, believe in social justice and are very conscious of the need to look after their tenants in the best way possible, and they do so, but there are other landlords who do not, unfortunately. The latter are the ones the committee, Focus Ireland and all the other voluntary bodies have to deal with. We must strive through a combination of measures to slow down the rate at which landlords are evicting tenants and provide alternative housing as quickly as possible while at the same time meeting our medium to long-term housing requirement. We need to deal with all of these issues at the same time, otherwise we will always be dealing with emergencies.

I disagree with the political point made by my colleague, Deputy Coppinger. I believe there is a focus in Government on the need to deal with this issue. This issue is taking up a great deal of Government time. The Taoiseach has informed the House that this is a priority matter and that all Departments who have a remit in this area will be called on to make an input. There is no point in our back-biting each other in regard to how serious we are about addressing this issue. I am not here for the publicity or because I enjoy meetings. I am here because I believe that like everybody else present, I have a role to play in resolving this problem. If we apply those principles in general and work towards the objectives already set out then we can solve the medium, long-term and emergency problems.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Durkan. Before our witnesses comment, I remind members that if this committee formulates proper responses to the evidence provided here and proper recommendations, they should not be alien to anyone's philosophy. They should be businesslike solutions, based on the evidence and the challenge for the Government will be to implement them. That is why we are hearing from expert witnesses like the Focus Ireland representatives, who have particularly focused on prevention today. We are very pleased about that focus because those who have come before us have had different levels of expertise. It is incumbent on all of us to address the evidence presented to the committee and come up with businesslike solutions that can be implemented.

Mr. Ashley Balbirnie: I wish to make a number of general points before Mr. Allen responds to one or two specific questions. I cannot let the phrase "endless increases in rent supplement" stand when the last increase was over three years ago. I must stress that it is not the case that there have been endless increases and we hesitate a little about how effective the proposed 15% increase will be because such a gap has built up.

The belief or hope that the private rental market will solve all our ills is a busted flush. Everybody we talk to, on all sides of the political divide, will now put their hands up and admit that it has not worked and is not going to work. At least there is now agreement on that.

Focus Ireland, like many other organisations, does not particularly want to put the squeeze on landlords; we want something that will work for landlords as well. It is only then that we will get some genuine stability in the marketplace. That is why we want a system that will provide an element of stability for both landlords and tenants.

Finally, in terms of the rent supplement and the private rental market, if there are people in private rented accommodation, we need to keep them there. We must do whatever is necessary to keep them there because it is so much better for those families and far more cost-effective for everyone involved. If families are in private rented accommodation, we must keep them there, by whatever means available.

Mr. Mike Allen: I will respond to the question as to why discretionary uplifts will not work. They can work to a certain extent if there has been a small misalignment or there are particular needs to be addressed. Discretionary measures have always been part of the rent supplement and supplementary welfare allowance, SWA, systems. While the Threshold initiative is very welcome, it is actually putting into effect something which has always been in the SWA system. Discretionary measures will not work, however, in the face of the scale of the current problem. The principle of all social policy dealing with people who are poor or vulnerable is to find them, target them and give them support, while not giving support to people who do not need it. Would that not be wonderful, but how do we find those people? The very people who are the most vulnerable for various reasons including language issues, stress, literacy problems and so forth are the ones who do not hear about the system and about the existence of discretionary payments. They are the most vulnerable but they do not benefit from the discretionary interventions. That is why there is a constant debate in social policy circles about universal versus targeted measures and if we cannot find the people to target, we are going to have to employ more universal measures. That is our position on the rent supplement.

It is also worth saying, in the context of Mr. Balbirnie's point about the scale of the problem in the private rented sector, that there are very few people who would not accept that it was a catastrophic error to have so many people who were vulnerable to poverty housed in the private rental sector, with the taxpayer footing the bill if rents increased. I do not know anyone who would defend that or claim that it was not a mistake. The question now is who pays for that mistake. While we are talking about an enormous amount of money being given to private landlords to pay for it, the alternative is to make the people living in the private-rental houses pay for it. Nobody can say that it is good social policy to give lots of money to landlords; it does not make any sense. However, we are not starting from that point. We are starting from the fact that we have had 50,000, 60,000 or 70,000 households living with that level of vulnerability. We are considering how the Members of the Oireachtas, as the successors of the legislators who made those errors, can deal with the fact that so many people are now living with such risks. It might mean spending money in a way that would not have made much sense if we turned the clock back a number of years. We have given a great deal of money to much more undeserving people on foot of mistakes they have made in the past.

We were also asked about the delivery of social housing numbers. Certain assumptions were made about the speed with which the private developing market would pick up and start generating new housing estates, and consequently Part V properties, that would build into the plan as written. It transpired that those assumptions were not true. The question of whether that might have been foreseen is a different one. The new Minister has said a few things that give me some faith that he recognises the current position and believes that alternative things need to be done, rather than waiting for the private sector to generate social housing as a by-product.

Time will tell whether that is the case.

We were also asked about single landlords. It is really the same issue about targeting people. It is right to say we did not want to get into a position where we were saying that one's right to terminate the lease when one wants to sell should be abolished. In such circumstances, we could be inundated with people with severe disabilities who need to sell their homes, or people who need to move back into their houses, who are caught by the new rules. I agree that there might be more nuanced ways of identifying who should or should not be allowed to sell a rented house, so that there is no blanket right to sell. A higher level of proof must be required and a longer period of time must be provided for. It is important to remember that the buy-to-let part of the Irish private rented sector is based on the notion that a house is a commodity which an investor can sell to get a return on his or her investment. It is not based on the notion that the owner of such a property is actually running a business, the business of which is to provide somebody else with a home. We cannot change that overnight, but we need to be moving in that direction very quickly.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Allen. Although we are near the end of this session, I will take one or two brief comments from Deputies Moran and O'Sullivan.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Many families and small children are becoming trapped in the homelessness crisis. I recognise that it is a significant problem. Family homes are being affected by what is going on in the banks. We are talking about what is going on in the State. Two ordinary people with a mortgage on their house might be spending €900 per month on repayments. If one of them loses their job, the person who is left paying the mortgage might be able to afford to pay €400. What would the witnesses think if the State were to intervene in such circumstances, for example by providing a top-up payment to help them with their mortgage? I suggest such an approach would prevent people from needing to go to agencies like Focus Ireland and the local authorities and it would stop us from looking to hotels for a solution. What is the view of the witnesses on that? If we could find a mechanism for making such payments, we could make provision for reviews to take place when circumstances change after three, four or five years. When people get back into the job business, they might be able to pay off the debt that is owed to the State. I suggest this would be better than allowing such people to be evicted onto the streets. I would like to hear the views of the witnesses on that.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: It would be useful if the witnesses could give us details of a couple of aspects of the Scottish model, which was mentioned as an example last year when we were working on a Private Members' Bill on the prevention of homelessness, so that we might include them in our report.

Chairman: Would Mr. Allen or Mr. Balbirnie like to make any concluding remarks in response to the final points we have heard from the members of the committee?

Mr. Mike Allen: I will respond to a couple of specific points. There are various models for people in mortgage arrears which would allow them to deal with the situations they are in. I refer, for example, to various forms of loans from the State or equity purchases. While this would not be our area of expertise, we would be supportive of such measures. If the committee wishes, we can include a couple of points about the Scottish model in a short written memo. As somebody who was born in Wales of an Irish family, I should mention that the Welsh model has come onto the map as a result of the introduction of very effective legislation about preventing homelessness. The legislation in question is well worth studying. Rather than taking up the committee's time by speaking about such matters now, we can submit a note about them at

some future stage.

Chairman: I do not mean to rush Mr. Allen and his colleagues when I ask them to do so sooner rather than later because this committee is working to a deadline.

Mr. Mike Allen: Absolutely.

Mr. Ashley Balbirnie: We would like to conclude by saying the message will be the same regardless of the research one examines or the country it comes from. Every penny one spends on prevention, as against emergency accommodation of one shape or form, will come back to one in spades.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Allen and Mr. Balbirnie for their written submission and the presentation they have made today. In particular, I thank them for the focused nature of what they were presenting. The committee will find their presentation useful in its deliberations.

Sitting suspended at 3 p.m. and resumed at 3.05 p.m.

Simon Communities of Ireland

Chairman: I draw attention to the fact that, by virtue of section 17(2)(I) of the Defamation Act 2008, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or persons or an entity, by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. The opening statements submitted to the committee will be published on its website after the meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I am pleased to welcome the representatives of the Simon Communities of Ireland, Ms Niamh Randall, Mr. Bill Griffin, Mr. Dermot Kavanagh and Mr. Sam McGuinness. As I said, we have received its submission which has been circulated to members and will be published on the committee's website afterwards. I invite Ms Randall to make an opening statement or give a summary of the submission after which there will be questions from members.

Ms Niamh Randall: I thank the Chairman and committee members for the invitation to appear before them. We appreciate being invited and have watched the sessions with great interest. We are aware that the committee has a lot of information, given the number of people who have appeared before it to date. What we will try to do is to focus on the solutions we think are necessary for the people using Simon's services all around the country. We are not trying to repeat any testimony the committee has heard. Our submission is detailed and if there are questions on it, we will be happy to take them.

To explain a little about the Simon Communities of Ireland, it is a national network working all around the country, providing local responses to local needs and issues. It is based in Cork,

Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the midlands, the mid-west, the north west and the south east. It has a very special commitment to working with those who face the most barriers and those who have the most complex support needs. We see the impact of the housing and homelessness crisis in every region and community. It is not only felt in urban areas; it is also felt in rural areas.

We welcome the appointment of a Minister with responsibility for housing, planning and local government. It is critical that the Minister, Deputy Simon Coveney, have the full authority and responsibility to address this crisis. That means having full Cabinet support. It also means having cross-departmental support from the key Departments of Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, Social Protection and Health, as well as the HSE. It means having cross-party support, which is where the committee comes in. We welcome the collaborative approach being taken by all members in working on this issue together.

When thinking about appearing before the committee, I thought about Jim, a man I had met in one of the temporary accommodation services opened in December 2014. He has serious physical and mental health issues. He sleeps at night in a dorm with about 20 other people and by day walks the streets. The staff in the service are brilliant and do their best to care-plan and case-manage, but it is so difficult in such an environment. We seldom hear about people like Jim, whom the State has failed time and again. Of those trapped in emergency accommodation, 2,700 are single people with no dependants.

It is critical that we learn from past mistakes and change expectations. The expectation has to be that people can and will move from homelessness very quickly into a home of their own. Some may need support at some point, but we all do at some stage in our lives. That must be the expectation of people who are homeless and of staff, volunteers and the Government, as stated in the commitments in the homelessness policy statement in 2013. We need to agree that every man, woman and child in the State has a right to a safe, secure and affordable home and that we need to provide it.

We have included much detail in our submission on housing supply across all tenures. I will not go into the details, but I draw the attention of the committee to a call we are making today, that is, that for a limited period 100% of all social housing allocations be made to people who are long-term homeless. We make this call as the numbers in emergency accommodation peaked at more than 6,000 this week, the highest number ever reported. This would apply to all local authority areas where long-term homelessness is an issue and last until the issue was resolved and apply to those who are stuck in homeless services for more than six months, the Government's definition of long-term homelessness. We are talking about people who were in homeless services prior to December 2015.

I will hand over to my colleagues who have a couple of short inputs to make. Mr. Griffin will speak about the right to housing, Mr. Kavanagh on rough sleeping and long-term homelessness and Mr. McGuinness about prevention and families who are homeless.

Mr. Bill Griffin: It is not surprising that everyone's obsession these days is in dealing with the emergency and getting people off the streets and shelter over their heads. While all that is happening, we are moving away from any consideration of the right to housing for all citizens. If measures are not underpinned with rights, we are always a supplicant at the table of resources. If people are at the back of the queue, as are those with whom we deal, their chance of realising a home is limited.

Ireland has obligations under five international covenants in which housing is specifically

stated. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family. The right to housing is not just about having a roof over one's head. The definition of that right includes that there should be security of tenure, availability of services, materials and infrastructure and that it should be affordable and habitable. These four or five issues are some of the difficulties we, both legislators and providers, must deal with on a day-to-day basis.

The result of the absence of a rights-based report that provides for people to follow up on their right to a home is what is happening currently throughout the country. Tenants are being given notice to quit because banks are forcing landlords to realise their assets to pay loans or because they are unable to keep up with increasing rents. There is no consideration for tenants. This is all being done legally, with tenants getting notice to quit, etc., but the reality is they end up homeless or end up in a hotel for months on end. The schemes that were set up to give protection are falling apart. Significant numbers of landlords are leaving the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, which was designed to give security of tenure to both tenant and landlord. Why are they leaving the scheme? Speaking as the man in Galway did, it is because they can get better and higher rents in the open market and the standards associated with the RAS are not applicable. When the three years are up, these landlords are moving away from the scheme and the councils cannot get them to re-engage. Even with Galway councils paying a little extra, that still does not bridge the gap between what tenants are allowed to pay and rent in the current market.

The freezing of rent supplement in 2013, despite resistance from all sides, was done on the basis that if rent supplement was allowed to keep pace with market rent, it would fuel rent rises. This has happened in any event. Rent increases have happened all over the country, without any contribution to that rise from people dependent on social welfare.

In the current discussion, we are constantly informed that the issue is all about housing. If, however, we are to help people remain in their houses, they also need support services related to health and social needs. Over the past four years, some 20% of the social inclusion budget of the HSE - the smallest care group within the HSE - has disappeared. There is no discussion going on in regard to reversing that, as I was told yesterday at a meeting with our local HSE. While unions are trying to get wage cuts reversed for staff whose wages were cut over these past years, there is no discussion about the people these workers serve. The fact that people cannot access the supports they need to prevent them from losing their homes is leading to even more problems. Because they have no rights, people are ending up in overcrowded emergency hostels. We appreciate the need for an emergency response, but a dormitory response is not a solution, it is merely an emergency response.

It is sad that decisions about allocations are increasingly discussed in terms of who is deserving of accommodation. We hear every day that what has happened, as I am sure the committee has heard in all of the submissions made to it, is that the influx of families into this sector in recent years has meant that these families are now seen, formally and informally, as the priority. The people we are dealing with are individuals - 2,700 individuals without families who are in emergency situations. They are now being trapped in that situation. I urge the committee to please remember that families are not the only issue. Certainly, we do not want children growing up in hotel rooms, but do not just deal with that issue or feel that dealing with the issue of families in hotel rooms is dealing with the problem.

As housing supply dwindles, the prioritisation of smaller and smaller groups is occurring, along with discussion about who deserves the housing available. What we suggest to this com-

mittee is that while it is dealing with the emergency and considering other solutions, it should not abandon consideration of the right to housing for all of our citizens. A week or so ago, legislation was pushed through in regard to hard-pressed mortgage holders. That is all very good for those who can afford a mortgage, but what about hard-pressed people who will never be able to afford a mortgage?

Mr. Dermot Kavanagh: I will talk a little about rough sleeping and long-term homelessness and the link between them.

Emergency accommodation is not a solution to homelessness. As Mr. Griffin pointed out, the response to the crisis of rough sleeping has involved the provision of a lot of extra shelter beds, often dormitory beds. As a strategy, this does not address homelessness. In the long run, it leads to institutionalisation and dependency and, over time, the solution itself becomes the problem. In terms of a solution that works, I am sure the committee has heard a lot about the concept of Housing First. This means housing people without preconditions or expectations of them being “housing-ready”. People are put into housing and support is provided, including clinical and housing support as well as support towards community reintegration.

On the problem of long-term homelessness, it is interesting to look at recent analysis of shelter usage in both Cork and Dublin. Dr. Bernie O’Donoghue Hynes of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive presented a paper some months back entitled Patterns of Homeless Emergency Accommodation Use in Dublin. Her findings, which were consistent with international findings from the United States, Denmark, Canada and other places, suggest that the vast majority of emergency shelter bed nights are accounted for by people who are either long-term or episodically homeless. According to these analyses, homeless people can be divided into three groups: those who are homeless in the short term and have few episodes of homelessness; those who are homeless repeatedly and have a number of episodes of homelessness; and those who are long-term homeless and are in the shelter system long term. Dr. O’Donoghue Hynes found that between 2012 and 2014, 7,254 people used emergency accommodation in Dublin, of whom 13% or 924 people were long-stay shelter residents. They accounted for 52% of the emergency bed nights during the period. When Cork Simon looked at the data for our emergency shelter, we made remarkably similar findings. The proportion of people in 2015 who met the Government’s definition of long-term homeless was 12%, and that group accounted for 51% of the shelter bed nights last year.

These statistics clearly suggest that a strong focus on housing people who are long-term homeless will have the greatest effect on freeing up emergency bed nights, thereby eliminating rough sleeping. The Cork Simon emergency shelter has 44 beds. On average, we have 50 people in per night and, on any given night, 25 of those meet the Government’s definition of long-term homeless. Over the course of last year, 48 people in total met that definition. There are roughly 18,000 bed nights a year in the Cork Simon shelter. If we were to house those 48 people and provide support in housing them, we would free up 9,000 bed nights - an average of 25 beds per night. We have nine people sleeping rough in the city. We could go back to our official number of 44 in the shelter and have some spare room. What holds true for Cork on the micro-level holds true for Dublin as well. While getting the housing supply is crucial, targeting it at those who are long-term homeless is equally crucial. It provides the greatest impact in addressing the crisis of long-term homelessness and also the rough sleeping crisis itself. That is a core point for the committee.

Those who are long-term homeless tend, on average, to have more complex issues than those who are homeless in the short term. Very often we will be dealing with challenging issues

relating to health, mental health, addiction and so on. There is a long list of well-documented international studies showing that the best way to address the housing needs and overall health needs of people with those issues is to provide housing first, and then to provide support in respect of those issues in the housing. We have been running a programme like that in Cork Simon, as have some of the other Simon communities around the country. They are very successful. We housed 34 people in 2013 and have tracked them each year. By the end of 2015, 85% remained housed. This shows that this intervention can deal effectively with long-term homelessness and rough sleeping.

There is a challenge here in that there is a great deal of talk about homelessness funding, which is crucial, but much of the focus is on funding from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. If we had the supply of houses tomorrow and took measures to ensure it was prioritised in respect of those who, as Ms Randall said, are long-term homeless - with 100% of allocations - and moved people into homes, we would need more than just housing support. We would also need clinical support and support in respect of mental health and addiction issues. There have been major cutbacks in those areas in previous years. The HSE will have to put the funding in place to ensure that this strategy will work. It could certainly have a huge impact.

Mr. Sam McGuinness: In the summary of our submission, there is a section on prevention and homeless families. I am going to outline the major areas of homelessness prevention and make some comments on them.

The first issue I wish to highlight is the requirement for a comprehensive plan for the private rented sector. I believe the committee has encountered this issue in the context of a number of other submissions. The next point is the extension of section 10 funding for further prevention work and pushing it out nationally. Another matter is ensuring a statutory obligation for the provision of advice and information and pushing that out. Much work has been done in some of the Dublin areas on that. I wish to comment in a moment on ensuring that national and regional homeless strategies are put in place. Another requirement is to increase the availability of rapid-build housing. I am sure we all have many comments to make on that. The final issue relates to immediate investment in Housing First solutions.

It is very clear that unless we can secure people in their homes, more than 70 families and many other single people will become homeless. There is a great deal of detail in our submission - as well as those of other groups - about how to prevent that. Ensuring that national and regional homeless strategies are in place is of major importance. Unfortunately, one could say that I have been around this sector for too long because we should have solved the problem by now. In February 2013, a housing policy statement was produced. Then there was the Construction 2020 document in May 2014. We had the Social Housing Strategy 2020 in November 2014. We then had an implementation plan on the State's response to homelessness, also in May 2014. There was the 20-point action plan to address homelessness. Now we have the programme for partnership and the establishment of this committee. Something different has to happen. Too many documents have been written and there has clearly not been enough action. Whatever comes out of this committee, I believe it is a wonderful, disparate group of people that can make a difference. Another important aspect of the process is that in pushing it up to the level of having the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Taoiseach on board, something different has to happen. It is a slight on all of us that 6,000 people are homeless and that the figure is increasing.

The other major initiative I wish to comment on is rapid housing. I was informed that what

was originally proposed in this regard would happen in time for Christmas. We were told that 22 buildings would be ready and people could move into them. When we met the Minister with responsibility for housing, Deputy Coveney, earlier this month, people had only just begun to move into those homes. That is a long time to wait. They say a lot happens between cup and lip, but that is an extraordinarily long time.

The other day I was just across the road from the Digital Hub. I cannot remember the name of the builder, but Digital Hub gave the tender and they began building 500 student apartments. They started in July 2014 and the apartments will be ready this September. That is not necessarily extraordinary and obviously a commercial builder can do that. The site was ready and the planning permission was there. We need more of that. We need things that can happen. The 500 people involved did not necessarily have to be students. They could have been homeless people. That would have been amazing in terms of what we could do. By the way, there are many other sites around that area. Something could be done to restructure the availability of such sites in order to address the problems that we are experiencing.

The last thing I will say is about the infrastructural deficit. Dublin Simon alone has provided more accommodation in the past three years than it did the previous 30. There was a need and we could see it. We have provided homes for more than 350 people. We used €6 million of our own money, which we received from legacies, donations, etc., and we received €8 million under the capital assistance scheme, CAS. That was a huge effort. Without it, I believe that we would be totally distraught in trying to assist all the people we are helping. We need more effort like that. AHBs, such as our one, need financing. We have just received approval from the Housing Finance Agency but we also need cars and other facilities because, although AHBs are motoring, they have not got to total capacity yet.

Members will know from the testimonies of all the witnesses who have appeared before them that we need to drive local authorities to provide homes in the way they have been known to provide them in the past. Without that being done, I cannot see how these poor people, of whom there will be 10,000 by next Christmas, will survive. We need somehow to engage the private sector, whether it is by engaging its greed, its margins or something else. Unless it makes money, it will not engage with us.

Chairman: We will take a couple of questions and will then revert to whoever wants to take them.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I am interested in the comments on single-person households and I agree that the scale of the family homelessness crisis and the increase in the number of children involved has taken the media focus away from single-person households. My real concern is that none of the 50% priority allocations made by the Dublin local authorities went to single people because local authorities do not, by and large, have single person units. In South Dublin County Council, for example, the number of single-unit allocations made in a given year might be one or two and that is from all the lists and not just from the priority list. Ms Randall made a proposal for 100% allocations but the majority of those will be two-bedroom, three-bedroom or four-bedroom units and they will still not work for the majority of long-term single homeless households about which we have been talking. How do we deal with that?

Some local authorities are applying HAP and for new entrants, or people coming from emergency accommodation into rental, HAP has a higher level of supplement than rent supplement. I am not a fan of HAP and would like to see that scheme changed because the HAP levels for single-person households are as bad as the old rent supplement levels. Can the witnesses com-

ment on that? Have they had experience of people encountering difficulties in accessing HAP accommodation as single persons because of its lower limits?

Deputy Mary Butler: I welcome the representatives of Simon. I met Ms Randall two weeks ago, before we knew if she would be appearing before us. I was very taken with her and with the work Simon does. I was very taken with the idea of the right to housing which struck me that day. The emphasis was on getting people into houses first and then providing follow-on supports. We met the Peter McVerry Trust this morning and it said that 80% of the people with whom it dealt had drug problems and 60% had mental health problems. I am sure the statistics are similar for Simon.

We are meant to have our phones turned off but I am getting texts from my office in Waterford where a girl has presented as homeless in the past hour. She has found a house in Portlaoise, which is where I live, but the problem is the deposit. The forms will take another four weeks to process and she will lose the house and be homeless tonight. It is unbelievable that we are sitting here discussing this and a story like that comes through on my phone. My PA is not there and the secretary is not so familiar with the situation as she is only new. It is horrendous that the house is there, the rent is sorted and she can afford it but she cannot afford the deposit, so she will lose the house. This is something we come up against all the time and this committee will have to look at the question of deposits so that people can get into private rented accommodation. It is so difficult to get a house but she will lose it over the paperwork not being completed fast enough.

Mr. Bill Griffin: That is a classic example of what is going on. I have signed the Galway Simon chequebook to pay deposits in advance of the paperwork being done as that was the only solution. My outreach section has come to me with similar stories, that everything was there except the deposit and the paperwork would take time. We have compensated for the slow paperwork on the basis that the person will - fingers crossed - get the deposit. It has worked out in each case but it is a strange way to run a system. We were told in Galway recently that if a person is applying for rent supplement, regardless of the fact that it will not meet his or her rental needs, the processing of it will take 12 weeks, but if a person is deemed to be homeless it will take only ten weeks. Galway landlords only have to wait about ten minutes to dispose of their property, not ten weeks.

Chairman: Where exactly is the delay occurring?

Mr. Bill Griffin: Arms of the State are meant to deal with these matters. My personal view is that we are in a crisis. We talk about it being an emergency, a crisis. Normally we do different things in those situations but the arms of the State are progressing on as they have always done. A person who is dependent on rent supplement or housing assistant payments, which are 30% below the asking rent in Galway even with an increase, is not competing on an equal basis with, for example, my son, if he was renting and had the asking rent. Added to that is the delay in processing how much money the person can bring to the table, which means he or she is definitely at the back of the queue. A recent survey in Galway carried out via *Daft.ie* found that 96% of the rentable properties in Galway were not accessible by people in receipt of social welfare benefits. No social housing has been built in Galway since 2009, in seven years, and, consequently, there is almost total reliance on the private sector to provide social housing.

Regarding the model suggested to house single people, we got together, at our instigation, with other housing agencies, COPE Galway and Cluid Housing, and we applied for funding under the last round of capital assistance scheme, CAS, funding. We were given €2.1 million

to buy 16 apartments in Galway, ring-fenced for people in emergency and transitional accommodation. We are still resisting calls from the county council, which is under great pressure, asking, for example, if we could put, say, Mary, into one of those units as she is really in need. We say “No” to such requests as this project was to “unsilt” things, as it were. If, for example, we cannot move people on in a resettlement service provided by the Simon Community Galway, people in emergency services cannot move in there and the same applies to people on the streets. A way around that is to have special projects for which funding is ring-fenced. That is a solution for 16 people but the knock-on effect of it will affect 16 more people. We must remember that mechanisms have always been put in place in terms of what we are doing, but the Government and Departments need to reassure us that they are working efficiently. There cannot be delays without good reason. The fact that it takes ten weeks to process a person’s application for rent supplement means that person will lose out.

Mr. Dermot Kavanagh: I wish to respond to Deputy Ó Broin’s comments on the 100% allocations. That is absolutely the point. It is not a silver bullet. It would be primarily of use to families who are stuck in homeless accommodation. There are other possible solutions for single people. In Cork, working with Focus Ireland, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and Threshold, we established Cork Rentals, which was the social rental model, where we stood between the landlord and the tenant. Initially, the purpose was to allow us rent the place at the rent allowance level, pay the landlord the market rent but also remove some of the perceived risk from landlords in terms of working with people who have complex issues, so we would deal with rent arrears, issues regarding tenancy management and so on. That was successful in getting a number of places. We have approximately a dozen currently, which primarily went to long-term homeless people. Between those and the other houses we have we managed to reduce long-term homelessness in 2012, 2013 and 2014. Last year, houses in the private sector dried up even further. There is still some mileage in the social rental model but it will involve, for instance, requiring people to be first in the queue when a place becomes available. They must make a decision quickly. They have to have the deposit with them and be willing to pay it and they have to make a good offer to landlords. There is a good deal of excellent practice on this area from which we can learn, not only in Ireland but further afield. Sometimes one can get ahead by agreeing to pay a bigger up-front payment, and that type of flexibility is essential.

Another point I would make is about the single homeless group. Many of them have dependants who are not with them. In terms of the pathway back towards integration, one would hope that there would be a route towards access visits and tenants would have, perhaps, two-bedroom accommodation to meet that need.

The vacancy rate is another issue. There are 6,000 empty flats and apartments in Cork and 48,000 in greater Dublin. Those could probably be brought into the system quicker than anything else but the point I would make is that whatever housing becomes available, whether it is through an increased allocation from the city councils, whether it is from other social housing providers, whether it is through being first in the queue with the best offer in the private rented sector or whether it is through new building and developments, one should target it at those homeless longest and that way one will have the maximum impact in freeing up emergency beds and getting the homeless off the streets. That is the Cork view.

Ms Niamh Randall: Mr. Kavanagh made some points about homeless single people. One of the areas is also about encouraging local authorities to think about acquisitions. According to the 2013 figures, 44% of those on the social housing waiting lists were single. Therefore, we need to encourage local authorities to start looking at different types of housing stock as well.

The point is that many who are in emergency services, who do not have dependants in their care, have children and a single unit would not be suitable for them anyway.

Deputy Butler made a point about the Housing First model. We cannot speak highly enough of it. The evidence shows it is a successful model. It works well for those who have multiple or complex needs and one can work with the homeless directly from rough sleeping. Once one provides them with an appropriate affordable home and then the supports in that home, it makes a considerable difference.

Mr. Griffin spoke well about the bureaucracy and I will not elaborate, except in terms of the deposit issue. The deposit issue is a massive problem in every part of the country. That is a key element that needs to change.

Mr. Bill Griffin: We all are obsessed and exercised and are using lots of resources to describe what I would call the whole elephant. The simplest way of looking at this problem is to think of one homeless person, such as the young lady referred to earlier, ask what would she needs to be housed tonight. If HAP levels are not at market rent level, she is at a disadvantage and, therefore, one should bring that up. One cannot get pre-approval for HAP or rent supplement so when one goes to a landlord, one must go back to the Department of Social Protection to say one found a property but ten weeks later when one gets approval, the property is gone. One must have the correct levels and one must be able to get pre-approval. These are all emergency crisis measures that can be applied on an individual basis. While we all are considering the elephant, the elephant is made up of individuals and every family we get out of a hotel is another solution. One should apply it like that, by taking a personal approach to the human being. That will lead on to instructions, legislation, telling Departments how this will work and telling providers, such as us, what we are supposed to do. To be honest, it is not so complex.

Ms Niamh Randall: Deputy Ó Broin asked a question about HAP. Would he mind reiterating the specific query?

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Obviously, the HAP limits are different outside of Dublin. In Dublin, the HAP family rates are still quite close to the market rent but the single person HAP rates are substantially lower and much closer to the old rent supplement rates. Is that something Simon is experiencing as a problem and has Ms Randall any thoughts on it?

Ms Niamh Randall: In terms of the gap between market rent and limits for both rent supplement and HAP, we conduct a study a couple of times a year called Locked Out of the Market, where we look at market rents and limits for both rent supplement and HAP. Certainly, we found in our last study that 95% of the properties were unavailable to those on these particular limits. There are mechanisms with the tenancy protection service but that is a Band-Aid. If one looks at the range across the country, there is a 55% gap in terms of HAP and rent supplement limits in Cork, 44% in Athlone, 55% in Limerick and 20% in Kildare. These all are large gaps. Unless we look at some mechanism to support people to stay in the homes they have, we will keep seeing increasing numbers of people entering homelessness. It is already at crisis levels, with over 6,000 homeless. We will just see more people becoming homeless.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: If the Chairman does not mind me asking-----

Chairman: Sure.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: -----does that research show a higher gap in rents for single room accommodation than for multiple room accommodation?

Ms Niamh Randall: It does. I can forward to the committee this table which maps it out. The table looks at the single person, the couple and the lone parent plus two children. We singled those out in 11 areas, both urban and rural. The point to make clearly is that in each area, the gap is greater than 15%.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank Ms Randall.

Mr. Dermot Kavanagh: On that very point, there is a special homelessness HAP scheme in Dublin where the figure can go 50% above the limit. I understand that was effective in housing well over 200 people last year. The same provision is necessary in Cork and other parts of the country.

Deputy Michael Harty: If we had better treatments for drug abuse and addiction, would we be able to prevent the 2,700 people seeking accommodation from becoming homeless or take them out of homelessness?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The delegation mentioned in its recommendations that the Government should be much more ambitious regarding the number of social houses it is to build. I welcome the statement that the Government should be aiming to build 50,000 social houses. Obviously, that is the focus of many homelessness agencies.

I wish to query a number of points in the submissions. The delegates called for a site levy, a role for NAMA and an increase in the proportion of Part V units to 20%. With regard to the allocation of 100% of local authority public housing to homeless people, Deputies might ask whether people are now so desperate that they would attempt to become homeless to get a house. We realise people are becoming homeless anyway, as I am aware since I come from an area where there is mass homelessness. I hate to say it like this but some people are in more of a position to do as I imply than others. In this regard consider the capacity of those with four or five children. To be honest, people are now resorting to all sorts of steps to try to get a house. I would like to hear the delegates' comments on how this might be prevented. We all know a hell of a lot of people on the social housing list or transfer list that are in dire straits and in overcrowded circumstances. They are in as bad a position as many other people. I am sure the delegates could testify that the transfer situation is brutal. There are as many bad cases of people who are in houses right now and who need to be accommodated. That is not the fault of the delegates because they are saying there should be more social housing.

With regard to the priority of this committee, it should focus on the provision of social and affordable housing. It was mentioned that mechanisms should be put in place to get the private market moving and building. However, I put it to the delegation that there is no guarantee that any of the private housing will go to homeless people, in particular, and even those in the rental sector who are in dire straits. There is no guarantee that housing will be affordable. I am not saying the delegation is putting emphasis on this but it makes several references to "across all tenures". It is often said by the Government that we just need to increase supply. We do not because there is no guarantee that the housing supplied will be affordable. We saw this during the boom. There was a significant number of properties supplied but nobody could actually buy any of them. One should consider the state we are now in as a result and the negative equity. Only 10% will go to people on the housing list. I raise this for emphasis.

Another point raised was that local authorities should fund approved housing bodies to deliver housing for the homeless.

I am glad Deputy Durkan has gone up to the Chamber.

Chairman: The Deputy provoked him.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Recently, local authorities have been sidelined by the approved housing bodies because the Government is trying to get everything off balance sheet. The local authority in my area has had to hand over housing left, right and centre to approved housing bodies. It has hardly built anything for five years in Blanchardstown. I believe nothing has been built by the local authority in approximately five years. I have nothing against approved housing bodies but believe their role has been way overemphasised for political, ideological and financial reasons. I have nothing against approved housing bodies, but their role is being greatly over-emphasised. That is being done for political, ideological and financial reasons. It seems strange. It is not like the local authorities are sitting on pots of money, or are the witnesses saying they are?

The problem with rapid-build housing is that it is not rapid. The witnesses said it themselves. They have to wait for them for a long period of time. If it was rapid, I would probably be a bit better disposed to it, but I do not believe it is that much more rapid than the provision of more permanent housing.

There is not a great deal of information in the submission on the cost rental model Simon Communities of Ireland says should be piloted. Reference is made to Cork. I raised this earlier with a previous witness from Social Justice Ireland. What I have read about the model sets the alarm bells ringing. What is being put forward now is that we should scrap the differential rent scheme in local authority housing, which is usually between 10% to 15% of people's incomes, in order to raise this money. If a special purpose vehicle is set up, the money has to come back in. There was a discussion earlier around getting rid of the differential rent scheme basically to make the rents pay more. We could get more rents in if the threshold was raised for social housing. A lot of people would like to go on the housing list who might not have seen themselves on it before and one would then have more people working with the result that there would be an increase in overall rental income. What I have seen of these cost rental models is that they involve approximately 70% of the market rent. Even 70% of market rent is far too high because what people are paying now in terms of their income and the impact on their families and their lives is outrageous. I do not like the idea that the money has to come from the people who get the houses. There should be ways of taxing wealth to bring in extra revenue to build social housing. I am not saying Simon Communities of Ireland is advocating that as the only way, but the witnesses might elaborate in that regard.

Chairman: We have one further contribution from a member and then it will be back to the witnesses.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I am not caught up on the approved housing body versus the local authority issue. I am more interested in who is going to provide the quality housing that is needed. Simon Communities of Ireland said that it was providing more accommodation now. Do I take it that it has the capacity to provide even more? What are the steps for it to do that?

I also have concerns about the possibility of 100% allocations to homeless lists because I am looking at other people who have been on the housing list for a very long time. They also have a great need of housing. What we are seeing at times is people from the homeless lists being offered accommodation and, for various reasons, either not taking it or not being considered acceptable in the particular complex for various reasons. It is causing delays in the places being

allocated. We are still seeing flats and whatever being left vacant for an inordinately long term because of that. If something is available and somebody from the homeless list is not prepared to take it, there should be one more look at the homeless list but then it should go to the other list. We cannot leave places vacant for as long as is happening. I have concerns around that.

This is a difficult issue. The communities I represent are very close-knit, they all know one another and it is very hard to listen to somebody telling me that such a person is on the homeless list, but is not really homeless and is nevertheless getting ahead. It is the fairness aspect that is very important.

I saw the rapid-build housing on the site in East Wall. I would go into one in the morning if that was my choice. However, the question of divergence arises. I do not think any of them costs more than €90,000 to build. The cost increased from €30,000 to €70,000 generally. Now, we are looking at what they are costing when all the other costs are factored in. Can the witnesses comment on that?

Chairman: There is a range of different issues raised for the witnesses to address. They need not each answer each one, but collectively they can decide how they are going to approach them.

Ms Niamh Randall: I will take a stab at some of the bits and pieces.

To come back to Deputy Coppinger's questions, first and foremost, on the allocations piece, we were suggesting this would refer to people who have been homeless for six months or more, which is those who were homeless prior to December 2015. That would be in place to prevent the possibility that people might make themselves homeless as a result. It would be a point-in-time thing only. We are aware there are people all around the country who are living in awful conditions, where they have to share overcrowded accommodation and so on. We are prioritising need by focusing on whole families that are trapped in hotel rooms and grown adults sharing dormitory-style accommodation. While this is very much a point-in-time thing, it has to be part of a number of measures to stem the flow of people becoming homeless, such as measures around rent certainty, increases in rent supplement and HAP, and around increasing security of tenure for those in the private rented sector. We need to stop the flow of people becoming homeless. If we can do that, and if we can look at mechanisms to deal with those people who are currently stuck in emergency accommodation - and do that quickly - we can limit the impact and the damage. We know the impact on people's health and well-being in terms of the trauma and stress they suffer. The longer people are stuck in situations such as that, the more support they will need to live independently in the longer term.

The Deputy raised the issue of the social housing strategy. We believe there should be much more ambitious targets in respect of local authorities building and delivering social housing. We have concerns about the over-reliance on the private sector to deliver in this regard. The proposal that 75,000 units would come from the private rented sector is not sustainable in any way, particularly in light of the current position of that sector. Therefore, we would absolutely encourage local authorities to build and deliver housing, and we see their role as being the primary one. The approved housing bodies do have a role, however, particularly with regard to partnerships between local authorities and approved housing bodies in some situations. Mr. Dermot Kavanagh may speak about the situation pertaining to the local authorities and housing in the south east, which might provide an example of what we are talking about in this regard.

With regard to the treatment piece, we know drug and alcohol use can be a cause of people

becoming homeless. It is obviously important for people to have access to treatment, rehabilitation, support and aftercare, and important they have accommodation to go to after they have entered treatment. The Housing First model is clearly predicated on having no conditionality. The important thing is that it is not “treatment first” because it is very much the case that once people are in a more secure and settled home, the impact on their drug and alcohol use is quite significant. We know the highest levels of drug use and risk behaviour are seen among people who are rough sleeping, staying in squats or staying in emergency accommodation. Once people are in a more stable housing environment, this often gives them the opportunity to reflect on their drug or alcohol use. If that support is being provided, people can be referred on to treatment services. We need a greater interface and connectivity between the national drugs strategy, the mental health strategy, the mental health services and the physical health services to ensure we are providing what people need.

With regard to capacity at a community level, I will ask my colleagues to come back to Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan on that. I also saw the rapid-build units and I was very impressed by them. I am not sure what happened in regard to the delays or in regard to the costs becoming greater and greater. I know they had been much more reasonably priced, so I am not sure what happened.

The cost-rental model is a commitment in the social housing strategy. The Department of housing, planning and local government has developed the cost-rental model and our argument is that we need to get it out there to see if it will work. The big thing is making it more affordable, not only for people in receipt of social protection payments but also for those on low incomes.

Mr. Bill Griffin: Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan commented on allocations. I mentioned the project we had in Galway, where it is written into the service level agreement that if, after a period of three months, no nomination comes from someone who is classed as homeless, the allocation goes to someone off the general housing list. That can be built in. Ultimately, the local authorities have the say on who gets those places, as opposed to State service providers such as ourselves. There is no need for it to be exclusive. To again use a local example, last year Galway City Council spent €222,000 on putting people in hotels whereas it started the year by setting aside a budget of €9,000 for this. By definition, those people are the council’s priority. That is just a local example of how bad it has become.

We are obviously here to represent a certain group of people on the housing list. Because of what is happening, people who are classed as homeless are now becoming the councils’ priorities because they are spending large amounts of money. We talk about development each year. There is also word that the Department may have to hold back on 25% of the funding to cope with the emergency, so some of the more long-term solutions we have talked about here today will probably not get dealt with again or will be at the back of the queue.

Mr. Dermot Kavanagh: May I come in on a few points? First of all, Deputy Harty raised a question about whether there was a link between the quality and extent of mental health and addiction services and the prevalence of homelessness. There is indeed and there is again very strong international evidence that where better services are in place fewer people become homeless. Most significantly, fewer people fall into the category of long-term homeless, so that is why it is essential in helping people to exit homelessness to have the services in place to sustain that.

That links to Deputy O’Sullivan’s question in a way. Regarding local authority allocations

and the whole issue of who provides housing for homeless people, one of the challenges is that people who are long-term homeless and have complex needs sometimes have a particular history and would fall foul of the scheme of letting priorities. It almost becomes the case that one is sentenced to homelessness for past misdemeanours or troubles in one's personal life. Getting around this and being able to give people a second chance to access housing and a way forward in their lives is crucial. In Waterford, for example, the local authority has allocated houses to South East Simon Community for its Housing First project, which is quite useful and one possible way of doing this.

Regarding who provides housing, whether it is our organisation as an approved housing body or whether it is the local authority or whoever, the bottom line for all of us in Simon is that somebody must provide housing for the people we serve. In Cork city we get practically nothing in allocations from the city council. Much of the reason for this is that we work with many single homeless people and many of the units are three-bedroomed and so on. Sometimes it is hard to house people because they have complex issues, and where nobody else will house them, we will house them. Measures should be taken, however, to ensure that people have access through social rental models, direct public housing or whatever other means. The priority in addressing homelessness is clearly to house homeless people, especially those who have been homeless the longest.

Mr. Sam McGuinness: I will string a few of those questions together. In the greater Dublin area there are between 4,500 and 5,000 people, including children, homeless. The number of children is about 1,800, the number of parents of those children is about 1,200, and the number of single adults is 1,800, or nearly 2,000 if one adds the rough sleeper numbers given by Merchants Quay Ireland. This is a clear priority and therefore something needs to be done.

As Ms Randall and Mr. Kavanagh said, the longer people are homeless, the more issues they will have. The big problem we have in our detox facility on Ushers Island is getting people in there and getting them out to move on. There is shortage of move-on accommodation. The HSE cut our budget four, five, six or seven years ago by 22%. That has not been restored so we are still operating on that and trying to increase the services we offer. Ms Randall reminded me earlier when we were talking about this that the drugs initiative was cut by 37%. When the numbers are increasing all the time, the issues and the complexity will increase too. Nobody is better off in emergency accommodation, whether private emergency accommodation or any other kind of accommodation. This is not good for us.

Returning to the question of what more we would do, we have at present 100 units in the pipeline. We could probably get 125 people into those. We are a specialist housing association which is part of an organisation that delivers services. We are not in the big time; we are not providing thousands of units. Approved housing bodies, AHBs, are capable of providing more accommodation. The issue is that many of them have now been approved by the Housing Finance Agency. Land and then finding places to buy are the issues. When we started three or four years ago, there was a lot of low-hanging fruit and most of this is now gone. It is very difficult to find one-bed accommodation because it has not been built. We are doing what everybody else does with two-bed accommodation, which is getting people to share. For people to share, they need more supports because they must be made ready for it. The longer people are homeless, the more they forget many of their domestic skills. The support to live independently, SLÍ, process needs to be expanded to all areas because, at present, it is very much with the four local authorities in Dublin.

Ms Niamh Randall: It is important to have specialist housing providers working with peo-

ple who have high-level needs, but there is also an importance in ring-fencing resources from general housing providers in the longer term for people leaving homelessness who might have high-level needs. In such situations we can have models such as the social rental agency model with a three-way relationship between the tenant, landlord and an organisation providing support.

Dr. Michelle Norris of the Housing Finance Agency, HFA, came before the committee earlier this week and she spoke about the fact that local authorities currently cannot borrow from the HFA. This avenue should be explored with regard to finance for local authorities to ensure they can build more.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses for their attendance and for their presentation. As somebody who is familiar with the issues in Dublin, it was interesting to hear perspectives from outside the capital.

Sitting suspended at 4 p.m. and resumed at 4.05 p.m.

Novas Initiatives

Chairman: I draw the witnesses' attention to the fact that, by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise nor make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

The opening statements submitted to the committee will be published on the committee website after the meeting. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I am pleased to welcome the representatives of Novas Initiatives - Dr. Una Burns, Ms Anne Cronin and Mr. John Rogers. The opening statement has been submitted to members. If Dr. Burns would like to make an opening statement, my colleagues will have a number of questions for her.

Dr. Una Burns: Good afternoon. I am Dr. Una Burns. We would like to begin by thanking members for the opportunity to present to the committee. We welcome its focused approach to the housing and homelessness crisis. As we contributed to the Dublin and Limerick network presentation, we will try to avoid duplicating those points and concentrate on our own experiences.

Novas is a national organisation providing services to families and individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness throughout Ireland. We are a tier 2 organisation providing 217 units of accommodation. Our output is focused in the mid-west, Kerry and Dublin. We are the largest providers of homeless accommodation in the mid-west region. Last year, we worked with approximately 2,200 people. We play a vital national role in supporting some of Irish society's most vulnerable households by providing a range of preventative services, ten-

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ancy sustainment services, supported temporary accommodation, long-term housing and drug, mental health and disability services to marginalised persons. Many of our clients are particularly marginalised and are not served by mainstream services or existing voluntary organisations. We support our clients around the pillars of housing, health and recovery. Our clients are vulnerable and present with increasingly complex needs, including entrenched drug use, intergenerational poverty, poor education, family breakdown, experience of trauma, enduring mental health issues, dual diagnoses and repeated experiences of the criminal justice system.

Our presentation will highlight the obstacles and provide specific actions that can immediately address the crisis. It will encompass both elements of our organisation in terms of our homeless and ancillary services and our ability as an approved housing body, AHB, to provide long-term housing for the most marginalised.

Since 2012, we have delivered approximately 170 units to formerly homeless individuals. More than 50% of this was new stock, with the rest being refurbishments. The majority of our clients now have their own rooms in supported temporary accommodation.

On prevention, we recommend that the rent limits available under the HAP homeless pilot, which are 50% above rent supplement levels, be maintained. We support the extension of the HAP homeless pilot to all urban centres given homelessness is now a national crisis.

We believe the housing assistance payment, in terms of implementation, should be revised. The experience in Limerick is that there is a significant time lapse between a household securing a home and the commencement of HAP payments. In some cases, this timeframe is approximately three weeks, with no reimbursement system in place in respect of payments for the intervening period. This means a vulnerable household commences its new tenancy in arrears. We believe that where this happens there must be a reimbursement of households to ensure they can properly engage in the process. We believe that for households in receipt of rent supplement the rates should be increased and that increases will not be sufficient if not accompanied by rent controls linked to the consumer price index. We believe that nobody should become homeless because of the gap between a household's income and rent demands. We know that in some cases community welfare officers are exercising discretion and increasing payments where there is a risk of homelessness but this is not happening across the board. Our intensive family support service in Limerick has dealt with cases involving people at risk of homelessness because they had been denied an increase in payment from a community welfare officer. Through our intervention many people have managed to secure an increased payment but we believe this discretion should be applied in all cases where there is a risk of homelessness, particularly when the risk is driven by economic reasons.

On the tenancy protection service, this service is doing immense work in Dublin and Cork and, in our view, should be extended nationally. We have been campaigning for a long time for the reversal of the reduced social welfare payment for those under 25. We believe this reversal is paramount and that in its current state it is discrimination. In terms of overall prevention, we believe that the redirection of resources to preventive measures will reduce the number of households entering temporary and emergency accommodation, which is expensive and has poor outcomes for everybody, particularly families.

We support the development of new housing but we believe that such developments must be of mixed stock and include, in particular, one-bedroom units, which any search of *Daft.ie* will show are nigh impossible to find for people on rent supplement or in receipt of HAP. Currently, 75% of households in Ireland comprise three individuals or less and this should be reflected in

any new developments. We advocate the speedier turnaround of vacant social housing units and voids, the number of which we acknowledge is reducing. In terms of other stock that is not social housing as identified in the Housing Agency's report of 2011 the focus must be on refurbishment of units in areas of most need as this will have a quicker turnaround than new developments.

At a local level, Mr. Stephen Kinsella, senior lecturer of economics in the University of Limerick, UL, recently reported that 30% of stock in Limerick is vacant. We need to examine what can be done at local level to improve the situation there. We support the provision of more social housing for Housing First and other tenancy sustainment projects. In Limerick, there is no social housing available for these projects and we are entirely dependent on the private rented market, which does not make it easy. In this regard it would help if local authorities had discretion around the provision of market rent for single individuals in two-bedroom apartments. Two-bedroom units are often a better option for single individuals, particularly single individuals with complex needs. The provision of such independent units rather than accommodation in a complex would result in better outcomes for those people. Availability of these properties is better than that of one-bedroom units and provides for potential access that such clients might have to their children. This reassurance would allow approved housing bodies like Novas, Clúid and so on to purchase two-bedroom units for single occupancy use.

Another important point not included in our earlier submission to the committee is that the State's 2014 action plan to address homelessness recommends that the Department of Social Protection review the current scheme of accommodation to provide that rent supports would be attached to the person rather than the property and that, given the support needs of such individuals, maximum rent limits may be exceeded where there is special housing needs, including homelessness. Unfortunately, this recommendation was never acted on at local level. We urge the committee to revisit recommendation 5.6 of the plan and to ensure that it is enforced on the ground. This would make the development of long-term housing for people with particularly special and complex needs more economically viable. With that money we could also provide wrap-around services for such people to ensure that they are successful in living independently.

We call for no reductions in funding for emergency accommodation. While we are completely committed to housing-led approaches, we must acknowledge that demand is exceeding capacity in all our supported temporary accommodation, STA. In Limerick in April, for example, only 25% of those who presented to Novas's STA service could be accommodated.

The cyclical nature of the housing crisis is exacerbating the situation in emergency accommodation services. Clients are bed-blocking because of the lack of move-on accommodation and therefore very vulnerable individuals are not able to access the service at all. We have been providing low-threshold accommodation services in Limerick for 14 years and already a very clear pattern of intergenerational poverty and neglect has emerged. While this is not unique to Limerick, compared to our services in other regions of the country it does appear more intrinsically ingrained. We recommend interagency research in this area so that we can start providing very focused, evidence-based solutions.

We encourage the recognition of, and the development of targeted solutions to, rural homelessness. To give the committee an example of this, in Thurles last year just 4% of those who were referred to our accommodation services actually accessed accommodation. In other words, 96% were turned away and the figure for this year is 94%. We need to look at this issue. On the night of 24 May, there were 17 adults and 13 children in bed and breakfast accommodation in north Tipperary alone. While the homelessness problem is certainly concentrated in

urban areas, there must be a recognition of the situation in the rural environment too. Very often local opposition to social housing projects can be more intense in rural areas. This must be recognised and the support of local councillors is fundamental to getting social housing projects across the line in such areas.

The capital advanced leasing facility, known as CALF, gives homeless charities such as Novas the ability to develop new stock in the form of long-term housing for homeless people and a number of small structural changes to the current facility would enhance our ability to do that. We recommend front-loading the accelerated CALF payments of 30% and reducing the timeline in the delivery process. The streamlining of the administration of the CALF system would also reduce the timelines involved. We have experienced some difficulty in accessing CALF for group homes and would recommend that the facility is extended to such housing. These changes could be easily made and would make a big difference to the provision of accommodation by approved housing bodies.

The delivery of new builds outside of the major urban centres is challenging due to the revenue available to service debt and the overall cost of development. Development costs include VAT and, where applicable, site acquisition and measures that would reduce such costs, such as providing increased access to State-owned lands, would assist significantly in increasing output and the potential to deliver housing in locations where rental income does not currently make it viable.

The final point, which we consider vital in terms of an integrated approach to supporting homeless people, is the provision of additional supports. We would encourage the development of integrated and on-site mental health services for homeless people. The report of the Partnership for Health Equity, which was published in September 2015, highlighted the significantly poorer state of the health of homeless people when compared to the general population. The development of more on-site supports would improve people's chances of moving out of homelessness on a long-term basis. HSE budgets must be returned to 2010 levels to provide these vital supports. Wrap-around and general mental health services should be provided to Housing First clients seeking to live independently in areas outside Dublin. We are finding this particularly difficult at a regional level. We also support the provision of a dedicated community midwife in the mid-west region for those pregnant women who are using our services, some of whom are entrenched in drug use. Many of these women return to our STA service the day after giving birth with no specialised support. I cannot overemphasise the importance of support services in terms of underpinning exit strategies out of homelessness.

Chairman: I thank Dr. Burns for her presentation. A number of members of the committee would like to ask questions. We will start with Deputy Butler.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the representatives of Novas for attending this meeting and making a presentation. This is the fifth presentation we have heard today. There are underlying trends in everything we have heard. Even though the worst problem is definitely focused in Dublin, I was glad to hear Dr. Burns recognise that this is "a national crisis". This point was also made in our discussion with the Simon Community. The problem seems to be getting worse everywhere. I am pleased that Novas, which is based in the mid-west, provides services in the Kerry and Dublin areas. This is also a rural problem. I represent the Waterford constituency, which has urban and rural areas. I am aware that people who live in rural areas sometimes find it difficult to access supports because they do not want to move their children from the particular schools they attend. They might not have transport, which means in most cases that they have to move into the city if they want to access supports. This is causing a huge problem.

I assume the witnesses see this regularly.

Dr. Burns mentioned that the preference of the agency is for a two-bedroom approach. Many of the agencies that have addressed this committee and many of the people I have met are floating the idea of a return to the one-room bedsit. Many of those who are homeless are single people who do not have children. I would like to hear the witnesses' thoughts on this aspect of the matter. Do they think there is merit in properly functioning bedsits that are up to standard?

Novas seems to place a significant emphasis on the housing assistance payment scheme. I have seen the scheme work and I have seen it not work. When it works properly, with a co-operating landlord who is paid directly, it is a very good system. I know it has been rolled out in Waterford, Kilkenny and a number of other areas. While it can work well, there are faults with it. Dr. Burns spoke about CALF payments. Perhaps the witnesses might explain what CALF is. Is it a governing body for approved housing bodies?

Mr. John Rogers: CALF, which stands for capital advanced leasing facility, is one of the two primary funding schemes. It involves, in effect, an element of subsidised loan from the Housing Agency. The bulk of it is private finance via the approved housing bodies.

Chairman: Is Deputy Butler finished?

Deputy Mary Butler: Yes, thank you.

Chairman: Do the witnesses wish to address Deputy Butler's questions?

Ms Anne Cronin: I agree with the Deputy that the issue of children in schools is one of the biggest difficulties experienced by families in rural areas when they try to access services. We have a couple of tenancy sustainment services. We have one in west Cork and one in Limerick. This issue comes up quite frequently when offers of housing are made. It is a legitimate concern for families. Our services certainly support families when they make the point that offers of housing need to facilitate children in staying in their existing schools. We often support families when they are making decisions in this regard. When family life is in a state of flux, it is important to maintain constant things like being able to go to the same school with the same group of friends and the same teachers. Such vital things keep families together and give children a sense of security. The Deputy has made a valid point. Our tenancy sustainment services often encounter this issue when they are trying to support families.

I would be concerned about a return to bedsits. There is an idea that by their very nature, they tend to offer a small and very inappropriate type of accommodation. Across our urban centres, there are many old and run-down pockets of accommodation which were formerly offered to people as bedsits. I do not think it would be ideal to go back to that model. We certainly need something to replace this form of accommodation, however. We have an absolute dearth of one-bedroom units because the bedsits were put out of action. We absolutely need one-bedroom units so that we can make them available to single people. Like other organisations, in the meantime we are asking for two-bedroom units to be used. We want it to be possible for single people to be placed in two-bedroom units, with the gap in the market rent being supported by the local authority. It is one of the most feasible solutions we can come up with. There seems to be some availability of two-bedroom houses and other two-bedroom units. It depends on the urban centre in which one is working. If such accommodation is available and given that we tend to place single people, it is obvious that we will avail of two-bedroom units and somehow make up the shortfall.

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On the housing assistance payment, HAP, the position varies from area to area. In west Cork, for example, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find landlords who are willing to engage with the scheme, regardless of the type of incentive they are offered. In Limerick more than 1,000 people are in receipt of a housing assistance payment. The rent supplement scheme is no longer available to new applicants in the city who are directed instead towards the HAP scheme. While the housing assistance payment is welcome, the issue is the availability of private rented accommodation because the scheme will only work if such accommodation is available and recipients are able to access it.

Deputy Mary Butler: Members also find that many landlords are not interested in accepting tenants who are in receipt of a housing assistance payment. Significant issues arise with the scheme which needs to be rejigged, although I have seen it work well on some occasions. Under the HAP scheme, the landlord is guaranteed a rental income, which means that tenants are more secure. However, the cap on the payment is often raised as an issue with us because, as Ms Cronin stated, people are being directed towards the HAP as opposed to the rent supplement scheme.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The housing assistance payment scheme operates in Limerick and while it works well in some areas, it does not work very well in the city because rent limits are set much too low. According to the submission, raising the rent supplement limit by 15% would not be sufficient. What figure would Novas propose?

Accommodating one person in a two-bedroom unit is of crucial importance. In some cases, a person will need support and have someone stay in the accommodation now and again for that reason. Others living alone may have a child who stays with them on occasion. The rent limit of €375 means that such persons will not be able to rent a two-bedroom unit.

Reference was made to the Housing First policy in Limerick and the lack of social housing for use as part of the policy. Does Novas intend to deliver houses under the policy or is it hoping local authority houses will come on stream?

While I know exactly what the intensive family support service is because my constituency office deals with it almost daily, I ask the delegates to describe the service to other members. It is a fantastic facility. Most members are concerned not so much with the number of people who are homeless but the number who may become homeless. The intensive family support service provided by Novas in Limerick and elsewhere prevents a great deal of homelessness by heading it off at the pass, as it were. I ask the delegates to clarify the matter a little.

Dr. Una Burns: In terms of increasing the housing assistance payment, HAP, the pilot scheme provides for limits of up to 50% more than the rent supplement. Novas believes having this flexibility would work. Based on a search of the *Daft.ie* website, a one-bedroom apartment in Limerick costs between €550 and €850. If the HAP payment is capped at €375 for a single person, a top-up payment of 15% will not work. For this reason, we recommend increasing the limit by 50%.

On the social housing required for the Housing First policy, we would like to secure units from local authority housing stock. However, we are also interested in purchasing homes. We need a guarantee that if we were to buy two-bedroom units, we would be able to use them to accommodate single persons. We would then engage in the process of acquiring properties immediately.

Ms Anne Cronin: The intensive family support service has been up and running for 11 years. It plays a preventive role as a tenancy sustainment service for families who may be at risk of homelessness or who are homeless. We work with families, many of whom are at crisis point, in their homes or private rented accommodation and try to put in place a preventive plan to ensure they will not become homeless and can stay in their current accommodation. This often involves working with parents to address issues they have and linking in with social workers. We advocate on behalf of parents if they are already engaged with social workers and assist them in attending conferences with them or on access visits if they are estranged from their children. We also support Mum or Dad in all the different life skills needed to maintain their accommodation. We would link them in with addiction services, treatment services and MABS. It depends on the complex issues that any family is facing. We provide an individual package of supports tailored to that family to help its members remain in their accommodation or, if at that crisis point where they have lost their accommodation, to access further accommodation be it private rented accommodation or social housing. More often than not it is private rented. It is becoming increasingly hard to respond in the preventative area as more often than not we have moved towards crisis management in that we have a long list of families who are waiting to receive a service from us. That is a new departure for us and it is not an issue we faced even three or four years ago. We now have a list of more than 30 families waiting at any one time to engage with our service. It is a powerful service in terms of the tenancy sustainment and the homeless prevention part but it needs to be well resourced in terms of the numbers coming to the service seeking support. There is a huge issue in terms of the increasing number of families who are becoming homeless and it is also an issue outside of Dublin. We have seen a rapid increase in Limerick. Also it is the only out-of-hours service in the city. When the homeless action team office closes in the evening we provide an out-of-hours service. If a family or a single person becomes homeless in the city at night or needs to access information or accommodation our family support service is an out-of-hours service that can be accessed. It tries to be as wrap-around as possible in that if one finds oneself homeless during the day or the night and needs to access bed and breakfast accommodation it is done through that out-of-hours service.

Chairman: I wish to ask Dr. Una Burns one particular question. One of the areas of concern to the committee is how to prevent people becoming homeless. In her opening statement she made a comment that she might explain a little more. We had representatives of the Department of Social Protection here recently and they indicated community welfare officers were supporting uplifts in rent. They gave a figure of maybe 8,000 cases last year and the number will be higher this year. The community welfare officers understood the risk of homelessness and were acting responsibly in terms of requests from people who were finding themselves in this situation. We referred to people paying top-up payments and so on. If I understand the witness correctly, she is saying some community welfare officers are not doing that. Will she explain that a little more? That creates a real risk.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: We actually raised that issue at that meeting. Our concern was that HAP payments were not adequate and there was a facility to increase them. It was confirmed that had only been done seven times in Limerick. In our experience, no one gets a top-up.

Dr. Una Burns: Regionally, it was Limerick we were referring to in respect of this issue. Our intensive family support service, in its response to the crisis, has divided its team to deal with prevention and crisis management, tenancy sustainment and life skills. On the prevention side, they are meeting people who say they are at risk of homelessness due to economic reasons because their income does not meet rent demand criteria. They have approached their

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CWO but a HAP uplift has been denied. In all instances in which this has happened, our team has approached the CWO of the homeless action team attached to Limerick City and County Council and the uplift has been provided at that level. Through our intervention, families have not become homeless.

Chairman: Are there families who have become homeless as a result of not pursuing this with yourselves?

Dr. Una Burns: There may well be but I am not aware of them. There is a risk that families may not know we exist or may not have presented to us having been denied an uplift. They may subsequently present as homeless instead of as a prevention case. It makes sense if one can get the HAP uplifted to keep them in their homes rather than put them into emergency accommodation.

Chairman: Is that a significant number of cases?

Dr. Una Burns: Deputy Quinlivan probably knows more about this. If only seven have been uplifted, there must be a significant number.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Seven is the number we were given by the community welfare office when its representatives were here. I was concerned that the officer was saying uplifts were freely available and that if people came to the clinic, the issue would be sorted out because that was not the experience any of us had. Everyone agreed there was not much of an uplift. I asked about this twice and she confirmed there had been seven uplifts in Limerick. I have never managed to get an uplift for anybody who went to the CWO. In Limerick, the CWO does not allow a Deputy or a public representative to accompany a person to the office. Most of those visiting the office are vulnerable and should be accompanied by somebody.

Chairman: I am not anticipating our report but it is important we are not blind to the preventative measures that should operate.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: That is why I raised the question about the intensive family support because it is an excellent service and prevents people becoming homeless. It is important it is funded. It is a concern that Novas has a waiting list of 30. I understand why there is a waiting list but it is an issue Novas needs to be helped with.

Dr. Una Burns: As well as that, the service is designed to support 40 families a month but since January, it has been supporting 50. It is operating at 125% capacity and there is a waiting list of between 25 to 30. Now, by dividing the team over the past few weeks, we have been giving people some kind of service immediately, even if it is just a phone call. If all they need is intervention with the CWO, we can do that with a phone call and in that way are preventing the problem from becoming more serious. However, even through the depression, our service has never been as in demand as it is now.

Mr. John Rogers: On a related issue, there is a format in regard to housing for a small cohort of our service users. Having gone through short stay accommodation in a group setting, that might be the preferred and appropriate form of accommodation for those residents. There can be issues in that regard as there is a gradation of support. The first tenant will get a certain level of allowance but that diminishes for the second and third residents. This puts pressure on funding for us because our ability to provide enhanced estate management and support services in those settings is compromised. The amounts of money involved are relatively small amounts but we can find ourselves in a situation where the resourcing to support a tenant is under pres-

sure. In many cases, residents are leading that desire to live in a grouped accommodation setting.

Dr. Burns referred to the capital advance leasing facility, CALF, system. This is a system we have used quite effectively to develop new stock but currently it is difficult, if not impossible, to apply the CALF system to group housing accommodation. If CALF was available in specific circumstances, it would be of particular benefit to groups we deal with for the type of accommodation appropriate to long-term needs for residents.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: We have been considering very vulnerable groups today, for example, people coming out of prison and people in addiction. I would like the group to fill us in further on its work in regard to another group mentioned in the report, those in crisis pregnancy, women who are pregnant and homeless, but who do not necessarily have an addiction issue. What supports are provided for them?

Ms Anne Cronin: We do not have a dedicated crisis pregnancy service. However, there has been an increasing number of women in our emergency supported temporary accommodation who are at various stages of pregnancy. There are risks in regard to accommodation for them and their support needs. Often the highest risks are when women have an active addiction. This is the most complex challenge we face. We included this issue in our submission because we wanted to highlight the issue as a serious challenge but we do not see it as an all-time prominent issue. However, when it has spiked, it has proved challenging. For that reason, we have asked for a dedicated crisis midwife to be available with the specific set of skills required to support us. We have a skilled staff but like many of our colleagues in other voluntary community groups, our staff are not necessarily clinical staff. We will certainly look for a dedicated midwife in the region to support us and other service providers in working with females with a crisis pregnancy who are active in their addiction or have an enduring mental health need. Very often there might be a learning disability or another issue that might reduce capacity. This is key in their transition through the accommodation and homeless services. What we do not want to see happen is women having their babies and then returning to supported temporary or emergency accommodation. That is such an awful outcome which is detrimental to the woman concerned, her baby and the staff who are trying to support her. It is a unique challenge which needs attention.

Chairman: That concludes questions. I thank the delegates for their attendance, presentation and responses to the questions asked. As I mentioned to the previous group, from my point of view and perhaps that of Deputies Maureen O'Sullivan and Ruth Coppinger, there has been a lot of emphasis on Dublin issues. Particularly when we are talking about community welfare officers, hearing about how issues are being dealt with in other parts of the country is important.

The committee adjourned at 4.45 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Tuesday, 31 May 2016.