

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM LEANAÍ AGUS GNÓTHAÍ ÓIGE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

Dé Céadaoin, 19 Meitheamh 2019

Wednesday, 19 June 2019

The Joint Committee met at 10 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Lisa Chambers,	Joan Freeman,
Denise Mitchell,	Fintan Warfield.
Tom Neville,	
Anne Rabbitte.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire.

Teachta / Deputy Alan Farrell sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputy Seán Sherlock and Senator Catherine Noone. I propose that we go into private session to deal with housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 10.15 a.m. and resumed in public session at 10.20 a.m.

Impact of Homelessness on Children: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: I welcome members and also viewers who may be watching our proceedings on Oireachtas TV to the public session of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs. The purpose of today's meeting is to meet the Ombudsman for Children and representatives of the Children's Rights Alliance to discuss the impact of homelessness on children.

On behalf of the committee I welcome Dr. Niall Muldoon, the Ombudsman for Children; Dr. Karen McAuley, head of policy in the Ombudsman for Children's Office; Dr. Carmel Corrigan, head of participation and rights education, Ombudsman for Children's Office; Ms Tanya Ward, chief executive officer of the Children's Rights Alliance; Mr. Louis Mooney, BL, Bar Council of Ireland; and Catherine McGuinness, Fellow.

Before we commence, in accordance with procedure I am required to draw the attention of attendees to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the joint 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 entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

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, her or it identifiable.

I remind members, witnesses and guests in the Gallery to turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode as they may interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for persons watching the proceedings on television to hear and for parliamentary reporters to report the meeting.

I advise witnesses that any submission or opening statements made to the joint committee will be published on the committee website after this meeting. After their presentations there will be questions from members of the committee. I thank all the witnesses sincerely for coming in today. Apologies for the slight delay in having them come in but we had some business to attend to before our public session. I call on Dr. Muldoon to make his opening statement.

Dr. Niall Muldoon: I thank the Chairman. I thank the committee for inviting me here today to discuss the impact of homelessness on children.

As members of the committee know, the Ombudsman for Children's Office is an independent statutory body, which was established under the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002. We have two statutory functions, namely, to promote the rights and welfare of children under 18 years of age; and to examine and investigate complaints made by or on behalf of children about the administrative actions of public bodies, schools or voluntary hospitals.

The rights and welfare of children experiencing homelessness has been a strategic priority for my office since 2016 and will remain so as part of our new strategic plan up to 2021. As members of the committee know, there has been a steady increase in the number of families experiencing homelessness in Ireland in recent years. According to the most recent monthly homelessness report from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, in April there were 1,729 families with 3,794 children accessing local authority managed emergency accommodation. A total of 75% of those families were in Dublin while 25% were spread across the rest of the country. Lone parents represented more than half of the families, 58%, accessing emergency accommodation in April 2019, reminding us of their risk of homelessness. Other types of families at higher risk include young parents aged 18 to 24 and families with four or more children.

A majority of families with children who present as homeless are still being provided with emergency accommodation in hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation. Similarly, the practice of self-accommodation continues to operate in certain circumstances. I am very concerned about the impact of that and that there do not appear to be clear timelines in place for bringing an end to these practices.

As members of the committee know, the development of family hubs emerged in 2017 as an alternative to hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation to provide for the emergency, temporary accommodation needs of homeless families. While hubs may be preferable to hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation, they have developed in the absence of an evidence base, without an initial pilot phase or any clear public policy objectives for their use. There are currently 27 family hubs in operation nationally providing 650 units of accommodation and my understanding is that further hubs are being developed.

In light of how family hubs emerged and are being developed further, we wanted to learn more about what it is like for children to live within those family hubs. Between October 2018 and January 2019, we undertook a consultation with 37 children between the ages of five and 17 years of age and 33 parents of 43 children under five years of age who were living in eight different family hubs. I would like to use the remaining time available to me to briefly highlight a number of the issues and recommendations contained in our report *No Place Like Home*, which we produced in April 2019 to highlight the views and experiences of those children living in family hubs.

Through our consultation, children and parents told us about what they liked about living in the family hubs, what they found challenging about it and the changes they would like to see made. As regards the positives, younger children spoke about making friends. Those who had access to outdoor play space and child support workers spoke very positively about those aspects. However, several younger children could not identify anything positive about living in a family hub, with some children simply saying there was nothing positive about it. Thirteen to 17 year olds were positive about the support provided by staff in the hubs. Where provided, facilities such as computers, a TV room and a study room were regarded as positives. Some older children regarded living in a family hub as comparatively better to where they had been previously, which may have been overcrowded family accommodation or hotels and bed and

breakfast accommodation. Parents of children under five years of age welcomed the relative security and stability provided by hubs. They also spoke about the support of the staff in those hubs. Where provided, the good facilities and activities for their children and access to a child support worker were also highlighted as positives.

No Place Like Home also highlights the accounts of children and parents of the negative impact that living in this type of environment is having on family life; parenting; individual and family privacy; children's ability to get adequate rest and sleep; children's health, well-being and development; children's ability to learn and study; children's opportunities for play; children's exposure to aggression and fighting; children's freedom of movement; and children's ability to maintain relationships with extended family and friends. It is not surprising, therefore, that the children we met frequently expressed feelings of sadness, confusion and anger.

One of the most concerning features of the perspectives shared by children is the consistency with which they referenced feeling ashamed about being homeless and living in family hubs. Similarly, parents consistently spoke about feeling that they had failed in their role as parents. Such feelings of shame and failure underscore the corrosive impact that homelessness can have on people's sense of their own dignity and worth.

As such, the accounts of these children and parents recall the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, who has characterised homelessness as a violation of human rights because the lived experience of homelessness "challenges the very core of what it means to be human, assaulting dignity and threatening life itself".

We have identified a number of priorities for action which were outlined in No Place Like Home. Among those priorities are the following - timelines need to be put in place for ending the practices of self-accommodation and providing emergency accommodation to families via hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation; an independent, formal evaluation of the suitability of family hubs as an approach to providing emergency, temporary accommodation needs to be undertaken; and additional measures are needed to combat the stigma associated with family homelessness and to support the dignity, self-worth and resilience of children and parents experiencing homelessness. Practical measures that need to be considered include increasing the number of child support workers, therapeutic supports and family support services available to children and parents living in emergency accommodation.

We welcome the indications that the National Quality Standards Framework for Homeless Services in Ireland, NQSF, will be introduced nationally over a 12-month period from 1 July 2019. However, we are concerned that there do not appear to be any plans to put in place independent statutory inspection of those homelessness services.

Existing primary legislation needs to be amended and strengthened to make children visible and to require housing authorities to provide appropriate accommodation and supports to homeless families with children.

The issue of enumerating the right to housing in the Constitution needs to be progressed as a priority. We would like the Oireachtas to proceed with a detailed examination of the recommendations contained in the Eighth Report of the Convention on the Constitution without further delay.

Following the publication of No Place Like Home, I had a constructive meeting with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government. I have also written to the Minister for

Children and Youth Affairs to ask her to give serious consideration to increasing the practical supports, including child support workers and family support services, available to children and parents living in emergency accommodation, including family hubs.

I am deeply concerned about the immediate and longer-term impact that the trauma of homelessness has on children and their families, therefore, I welcome this committee's decision to examine the impact of homelessness on children. I am happy to take questions if I can be of further assistance.

Chairman: I thank Dr. Muldoon. I call Ms Ward.

Ms Tanya Ward: I thank the committee for the opportunity to present to it today on this very important issue. The Children's Rights Alliance is an umbrella organisation. We represent more than 100 members. Our goal is to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. Our work is around promoting children's rights in Irish policy, law and services. We also provide an information helpline and legal advice services for children, young people and families so that they can contact us directly.

The issues I want to raise today relate to our helpline but also those coming from our members. We started working on this issue a number of years ago. Our members contacted us because they were so concerned about what they were seeing regarding the homelessness crisis. Teachers were telling us they had seen children arrive in dirty clothes for the first time in their lives and that they had never seen it before. They are seeing children arriving hungry and exhausted. They wanted to know what we could do about it. The ombudsman has talked about the high numbers we have at the moment. There is no doubt that there has been a lot of Government action in this area to try to alleviate the impact of homelessness. A good example of that would be the early years scheme that was put in place to give children in homeless accommodation the chance to be in an early years setting, to get a free meal and to get someone to look after them. There was research commissioned into food poverty.

The other area is that of education issues. The Children's Rights Alliance decided to take that up directly because we felt there was a particular gap and wanted to bring some attention to it. With the support of the Community Foundation of Ireland we commissioned Dr. Geraldine Scanlon, who is in the Gallery today, and Ms Grainne McKenna to carry out a study. They found that school was a really important source of solace for these children and that the parents would do anything they could to keep the children in school because it was their only sense of normality. The schools were found to be doing a great job. That was the overwhelming feeling coming through all the case studies with the families. The flip side of that was the individual experience of children. Parents were spending long periods travelling across the city to keep their child in school. For example, there is no homeless facility in Bray at the moment so people from Bray will end up being accommodated in Dublin, maybe in Clontarf. Parents could be travelling across the city nearly two hours to get the child to school. The child will be hungry and will probably miss the breakfast club and arrive at school late. He or she will not have homework done having spent another two hours trying to get home in the evening, will try to keep up in school but start to find it very difficult. It is very hard to motivate oneself when one is hungry and tired. When a child starts falling behind in school it is very hard for that child to motivate himself or herself. That was ultimately what the researchers were finding with these children. The longer they were spending in homeless accommodation, the greater the impact on their well-being and their mental health. We are very concerned about the impact on their long-term prospects in school and their ability to complete school and do well there. These are the kinds of things we are grappling with.

When we look at the homeless crisis itself, there are lots of solutions and tangible ways we can address this crisis. These include public housing to address the housing shortage, preventative measures to keep people in their homes, and also measures to alleviate the impact of homelessness on children. Particularly in non-DEIS schools, teachers and principals told the researchers of our report that they needed support, they needed an extra teacher or a home-school liaison officer for a temporary period to get them through this crisis. That made all the difference for them. They also talked about the need for a small budget to buy a meal for a child or to buy a bean bag if a child needed to sleep - these are some of the things they were thinking about - or a school uniform if the child arrived in dirty clothes. These are very basic things but they could make all the difference for these children. I urge the committee to look at prevention, housing solutions and measures to alleviate the impacts of homelessness. I am sharing time with my colleague, Mr. Mooney, who will talk about the legal solutions to this homelessness crisis.

Mr. Lewis Mooney: The committee will be acutely aware, as the ombudsman has already outlined, that there is no constitutional right to housing. However, as outlined in the statement that has been furnished to the committee, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child affords the right to an adequate standard of living for children within the jurisdiction. The courts in recent times have demonstrated a willingness to interpret domestic and constitutional obligations in light of public international law obligations on the State. That has been seen in cases such as *N.H.V. v. the Minister for Justice and Equality* in respect of the right to work. There is also a debate going on about the impact of Article 42A in respect of the right to housing and children. The result of this remains to be seen through litigation. It is also outlined in our statement that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its examination of Ireland in 2016 found that there were reports of major delays in respect of families living in emergency accommodation and inappropriate, temporary accommodation on a long-term basis. We must recognise in the political discourse that those families are also categorised, quite correctly, as homeless.

The Children's Rights Alliance is running a campaign called No Child 2020. The overarching principle behind it is for every child to be provided with secure and affordable housing. That is not the case now. Instead, we face an emergency in the homelessness crisis. That has been outlined in the Children's Rights Alliance report card. The Children's Rights Alliance is advocating for a best interests analysis to be inserted into the heart of legislation on the assessment of families who find themselves in homelessness. The evidence shows that the largest cohort of people in homelessness are lone parent families. As Ms Ward has outlined, children are being placed in accommodation far away from their schools and communities. This has long-term ramifications for their mental health, welfare and well-being and their interactions with their own communities. There is also a lack of suitable facilities within the emergency accommodation in which children are placed, and a lack of space, which is causing major problems for families. We are calling for a statutory obligation to be placed on the Government and local authorities to carry out a best interest analysis when placing children and families in accommodation and to ensure that the voice of the child is heard throughout that process and that children are consulted on placements. The other thing the Children's Rights Alliance is calling for through the No Child 2020 campaign is for a limit to be placed on the amount of time for which families can be placed in emergency accommodation. The politics of this is difficult but the evidence through the Home Works report has demonstrated that families in emergency accommodation are finding themselves becoming increasingly institutionalised and that is causing major difficulties as well. Those are the two immediate asks of the Children's Rights Alliance in order to be able to realise the much longer term solution of providing secure and stable accommodation for families across Ireland.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Mooney and Ms Ward, who have both emphasised the need to enshrine housing rights in the Constitution. From a personal perspective, I believe the Constitution is a document of principle but the fine detail of what that means for any matter should not be in the Constitution. The fine details should be in legislation. That is my view and, given what we have done in recent years, I think the public believes that as well. On the basis that enshrining housing rights in the Constitution does not build a house, change a policy or direct a budget, are we sure it is the answer to the housing and homelessness crisis and to the 3,700 children who are in unsuitable accommodation?

I completely agree that local authorities should consider the best interests analysis which Mr. Mooney mentioned but there is an automatic knock-on effect that persons who are legitimately on housing lists are displaced because a family has applied and there are children involved. Clearly the remit of the Children's Rights Alliance, the Ombudsman for Children and this committee is to prioritise rights and protections for children and the supports they receive. That is our role. However, is the best interests analysis something that would by default displace individuals who are on housing lists legitimately and may be ahead of those families? Is that the priority? Is this similar to medical grounds becoming a priority? If that is the case, that is fine, I just wanted to seek that clarification from the witnesses.

I completely agree on the time limits. The evidence presented to the committee and the reading I am sure all of us have undertaken indicate the profound and long-lasting detrimental impact on children in unsuitable accommodation, such as hotels and hubs. It has the potential to seriously damage the development of children, teenagers and young adults. The effect may be felt for many years afterwards, as the witnesses have both outlined that these young people are unable to do their schoolwork or study at secondary or third level. There is no dispute that these would be profound and long-lasting effects.

None of us wants 10,000 persons in unsuitable accommodation or 60,000 or 70,000 people on housing lists around the country. There must be some way in which we can alter the manner in which we procure or deliver housing in the first place, including the planning process. It has been altered but I have not seen major evidence of run of the mill, three-bedroom, semi-detached houses being delivered on the basis of fast-tracking. It has all been apartments etc., which is fine. Since everybody outside Ireland is doing that, why should we not do it too? At the same time, I appreciate that a three-bedroom, semi-detached house with a front and back garden is something that families need; children need those desperately as there is no better space for a child to grow and be nurtured and loved than in a home with a garden.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Ireland is a signatory, has a reference to adequate shelter. I struggle with this as I have heard it so many times but does this change policy? If not, which policy needs to be altered to ensure 3,700 children will no longer be in unsuitable accommodation?

Dr. Niall Muldoon: The constitutional change is vital. We have seen the benefit of constitutional change over the past number of years. Society changes and it gives our people on the ground around the country the benefit of these changes. A survey of Irish primary school principals at the start of the year indicated that 40% of principals had engaged with children in homelessness. The problem is spread all over the country and everybody knows someone in that situation. There is a groundswell of opinion that we must now protect our children and families at the highest level. We all know legislation changes behaviour. We have seen that with the other constitutional changes over the past five, six or seven years, all of which have created a conversation, brought issues to the fore and allowed a discussion to take place. We are

asking for a discussion to take place in the Oireachtas and across the nation to ask if this is the way we want to go and if this is the sort of standard that will be set for our children so we will not allow anybody to fall into this position ever again. Of course, this must be followed with legislation and that is where work must come from parliamentarians.

We must send a signal that our children and families are so important we will not allow anybody else to be in this position ever again. It must be a constitutional right that can be stood over. This must undoubtedly be followed with practical actions but that is the best answer. With the recent referendums on children and marriage, there was a very clear statement to the cohorts affected by the issues that we are standing by them. We need to get to that point. There was a constitutional referendum in 2012 around children and we have not followed through on that sufficiently. This is one way of ensuring that does not happen again.

The Chairman mentioned best interest analysis and displacement of people from one list to another. I am afraid that could be the sort of conversation that allows people to use the argument that homelessness is a choice and I do not want that to happen. Again, that is a Government decision-----

Chairman: In fairness, it is not a choice and we all accept that. The practical reality is-----

Dr. Niall Muldoon: Choices are being made but everybody needs a house. If there is a constitutional right to a house and a safe, dignified and secure place to live that is affordable for everybody, the Government would be making a statement to those 70,000 people and the people who may be in homelessness now. We would ensure that in future, those people would not fall into that situation. The best interest analysis becomes less and less important as we create infrastructure.

Chairman: My point refers to the immediate effect that such a policy change might have.

Dr. Niall Muldoon: Yes. It may have an effect.

Chairman: It would be a displacement effect.

Dr. Niall Muldoon: Currently, our concern is that children are not even mentioned in the legislation. It is a big gap.

Chairman: That is accepted.

Dr. Karen McAuley: We agree the constitutional right to housing is a very complex matter and it requires serious and detailed scrutiny. I know members of the committee are aware that the eighth report of the Constitutional Convention looked at economic, social and cultural rights, and it made a recommendation on the right to housing. Due to the complexity of the matter and the time available to the convention, it asked that the matter be considered by the Oireachtas. That was in 2014 and we are now in 2019 but the matter has not been the subject of detailed scrutiny by the Oireachtas in the way other recommendations flowing from the Constitutional Convention have been.

In the first instance, we would like to see that recommendation from the Constitutional Convention being subject to detailed scrutiny so the issues could be teased out. We are very clear that the constitutional right to housing is not a silver bullet and it will not effect change overnight. However, it has potential and it remains a stone left unturned. In light of the crisis we have all seen unfolding in recent years, it is incumbent on all of us to ensure no stone is left

unturned and the potential of the Constitution is properly explored. The key element for us is that the conversation, as and when it happens, should not be about whether it should be done but how it can be done in a way that brings the potential to have a meaningful and constructive impact.

As the ombudsman was saying on the best interests issue, under the Housing Act 1988, children are invisible. It is one of our key concerns. As members are aware, a Private Members' Bill, the Housing (Homeless Families) Bill 2017, has reached Committee Stage after consideration by the Dáil. It has not progressed since 2017. It is not a panacea but as primary legislation it has the potential to achieve some very important objectives. It would make children visible in the 1988 Act. When local authorities are making a decision on a request by a family for assistance, the Bill would recognise the family as a family unit and treat the best interests of the child as paramount.

Whatever about constitutional change, there is an opportunity to effect positive change for children and families in the context of primary legislation. Our understanding is there is, broadly speaking, cross-party support for this Bill and we would like to see it progressed. It may be adapted or changed but we would like to see that conversation happening.

Ms Tanya Ward: I will share my response with my colleague. We support a constitutional right to housing and the time is right to seek a constitutional referendum. It does not guarantee a house for every person, as has been noted, but it would set a clear direction to the Government about what it must do with respect to housing. Looking at the standard and unpacking it, there would be an onus on the State to provide homeless accommodation or a homeless services response and to provide social housing to vulnerable groups. It would also have to look at the quality of accommodation, as conditions have a major impact on the welfare of children and families.

There is the question of how a constitutional right to housing has been interpreted in other countries when people have taken cases under such a provision. It has not necessarily led to a slap on the wrist for a government or that a particular person had to be given a house. These are progressive rights so governments have had to realise them over time in line with available resources. It puts a spotlight on the Government's approach. Has the Government done everything that it can with its available resources to address this issue or have its decisions or actions been irrational in some way? It would shift the direction of how homeless and housing policy are developed. We have heard a few times about the issue with using prevention measures to keep people in their homes which would be challenged because we have private property rights in the Constitution. The Chief Justice and members of the court in general seem to be quite open about this issue which needs to be tested. If we had a right to housing in the Constitution, it would help to balance that issue. Private property rights would not trump the right to housing, nor would the right to housing trump private property rights. The courts would have to interpret both together. As the Ombudsman for Children said, it would be a strong statement that we are about providing everyone with an adequate standard of living, including the right to a house. It does not mean in reality that everyone gets a house but is more about the approach of the State to housing and accommodation. That is what it means legally.

A good case in South Africa explains this. It relates to a local equivalent of a county council which knocked down a shanty town for social housing. It was a good goal but the court said that the authority could not knock down a shanty town and not provide an alternative for the families living there. It found against the state. Those are the ways that a right to housing could improve or help the decisions that the Government and county councils might be making in this

area. My colleague, Mr. Mooney, will address best interest assessments, and I will come back about developmental issues and long-term impacts.

Mr. Lewis Mooney: I think Chairman’s question was about whether a best interest assessment would displace others on the housing list. The simple answer is “No”. The statutory mechanism would remain in place for assessment of people on the housing list and it would not be legally possible to displace individuals already on the housing lists. The best interest assessment would look at where children should be placed. As outlined already, hotels and emergency accommodation hubs are having a profound impact on children’s education. It has been seen through childcare cases in courts that parents are finding it increasingly difficult to parent young children in emergency accommodation, which is leading to major problems. The best interest analysis would seek to assess what is in the best interest of that child’s well-being, such as the facilities that the child requires in the accommodation to be able to develop and being as close as possible to the community the child is leaving and the educational establishment or school that he or she is in.

Through the Children’s Rights Alliance “Access to Justice” helpline, numerous children as young as nine and ten have contacted the Children’s Rights Alliance to try to find information on their rights. They have outlined profound issues about having to travel to school and the conditions that they are living in. That is why we think it is crucial that children are heard through the process and that their views are taken into account in this best interest analysis. There is an argument to be made that Article 42A already mandates this. That remains to be seen through testing Article 42A, which is obviously in its infancy as a constitutional provision. It is arguably legally mandated apart from what we in the Children’s Rights Alliance are advocating for.

Chairman: Before Ms Ward comes back in, I understand where Mr. Mooney is coming from. My response is that if it is a guiding principle in housing policy and it does not displace people, then all it can do is state the obvious. This is not the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government but the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs. While many of us have a great deal of knowledge on housing, planning and such, our role is a little more narrow. That sort of policy would suggest to a local authority that certain types of property that it has available are unsuitable to accommodate a family or small children. Is Mr. Mooney suggesting that certain types of property are not suitable because a child or schooling is involved?

Mr. Lewis Mooney: That is part of it. Local authorities are not under any statutory obligation to explicitly carry out this best interest analysis. That leads to major ramifications for policy, as has been outlined.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Mooney and appreciate him clarifying it. That makes it much simpler.

Ms Tanya Ward: Developmental issues have a profound impact on children and young people but we can address and change it. For children under four who have developmental delays, we could look at intensive early years provision to catch up because they can catch up. Educationalists working with these children and families could help them with the transition to primary school. They will be behind everyone else by the time they start primary school and there is a general impact on their well-being, including anxiety and stress. Children experience stress due to their parents being stressed about trying to get through the day, travel and missing out on things. We could look at that. There are solutions to this in education. Some schools are

doing very well already, especially the DEIS schools because they have some of the resources. They are looking for direction and support. One of the solutions that Grainne McKenna and Geraldine Scanlon came up with was having a number of DEIS schools working together with someone supervising who has the expertise to support the schools with their solutions. We know that this crisis will last until at least 2023 based on the statistics as they are at present. We need a time-limited solution to address it and to think about the school completion programme perhaps playing a bigger role in the longer term in tracking these children's development, keeping them in school and helping them to do well throughout the process.

The last matter is mental health and well-being. I was recently at a meeting with the housing charities and that was raised often. They think that psychologists are the answer. I said that it is a much broader issue and we need a spectrum of support for these children. It is possible to address all this through the right actions by the Departments of Education and Skills, Children and Youth Affairs and Health.

Chairman: I thank Ms Ward. That is very helpful.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. Some of the questions that they have already answered have probably brought us far along to where I will come in. There are 37 family hubs.

Dr. Niall Muldoon: Some 27.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Some 27. What was the average number of families in those when Dr. Muldoon did his research?

Dr. Niall Muldoon: They provide 650 units between them.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: So we will have another 1,000 families who are self-referring into bed and breakfasts or hotel accommodation and 75% of them are out of Dublin. That is becoming a norm for those 650 and, as Ms Ward said, an institutionalising effect is created because there is no clear pathway. I will be a little bit political for 30 seconds. Earlier this week, I saw a report which stated that 25,000 new units were being built by Government. If we want to cut to the chase and not insert anything in the Constitution and if we wanted to alleviate all child homelessness in the country, of those 25,000 units, we should allocate 1,750 for all the families who are experiencing child homelessness and just deal with it. That sounds very simple but it ends the problem. Despite all the long conversations we have had about children experiencing the fact that they cannot access education, do not have a front door, cannot be in their community and cannot play outside, among other effects and everything else we are doing to alleviate it, we can actually solve it because we only need 1,750 houses. That might sound very simplistic but it is much simpler than changing the Constitution, doing pre-legislative scrutiny and so on because at least we have a good base to start with. We would have removed the crisis and emergency. That is what I think we should focus on, lobby the Government for and ring-fence. How will we use the allocation being built this year and next year? Houses are being built. They might not be built in the locations where everybody is but, then again, this is where there will be an onus on people to work with local authorities to ensure that if they are offered a property where there is adequate support through schools and communities, they avail of it and do not state it is not close enough to their families or X, Y or Z. This is what we should be looking at.

The Children's Rights Alliance, the Ombudsman for Children and the committee should seek the ring fencing of 1,750 houses. Then we could use the hubs for the next tier of people

who need to avail of them. We would have a strategy and a system in place. This might be simplified but we need solutions as opposed to getting bogged down with what is in or outside the Constitution. We should work on that on the side. The Children's Rights Alliance displayed a card with an F but we need to display this card along with the solution. The solution is to ring-fence and we need to look for this. The committee would be supportive of this. We have to have solutions. We have to take children out of the crisis. Last week I was critical of the local authorities and I will continue to be so until we get the systems put in place for them. It does not need to be legislative; it is called best practice. We need to simplify this so there is a direction from somebody in a Department on best practices.

One of the reasons we have a housing crisis is the collapse of the economy and nobody can shy away from this. We have had five and ten-year fixed terms, which have all been maturing and now builders or whoever owns the properties are selling with a relative balance of equity. Some of the families who bought properties and fell on hard times also are within this. The HPL form that must be stamped is preventing families accessing social housing scheme faster. It is a Revenue document. If people received tax credits over the previous years, it cannot be stamped. If the form cannot be stamped people do not qualify for social housing. This is a huge barrier for many families trying to access the process. It is something that needs to be looked at. There has to be some way to support these families when they come forward. They are the people self-referring to bed and breakfast accommodation. They have had their own properties and feel the shame that has been spoken about. They do not want to tell anybody. The first time they look for support they are slapped straight back down because they do not qualify. These are middle income earners. They are middle Ireland. They get up and go to work and they are trying to balance everything. They could not hold on to their properties and they are struggling to pay the rent. They are being held back because of this form, which is something we need to look at.

What would the witnesses like from us? They have told us what they want in legislation but what are their quick fixes that we can push on the floor of the Dáil or Seanad to intervene? When the Minister, Deputy Zappone, intervened in the early years programme to help with buses it was a simple solution. How can we help with the meals? How can we ensure spare uniforms or an allowance? What is needed within the schools' capitation budgets if spare uniforms are required because they have not been washed? Is there is an allowance for lunches to be provided? Deputy Darragh O'Brien explained it very well when speaking about a particular school where every class brought in an extra lunch. There was responsibility within the class. People have lot of pride. Perhaps we should give some control back to the primary and secondary school principals so they have a budget to provide uniforms, books or lunches. Will the witnesses tell us exactly where they are at with regard to recommendations to the Government for support on this?

Ms Tanya Ward: I agree with Deputy Rabbitte this crisis is a result of the recession, the IMF visit and decisions made in the 1980s and 1990s to stop building social housing. This is what it is about. The homeless crisis is symptomatic of a deeper problem and it is a crisis of the rental market. The rental housing market is carrying everyone. It is why rental costs are spiralling out of control. If I were here speaking about child poverty I would say people on good incomes experience poverty because their incomes are being eaten because of the cost of rent. I agree the solution is building. On Saturday, I heard the Taoiseach speaking about building more houses this year than ever before, with 22,000. This is great to hear, and more investment is being made, but the challenge is with regard to what is needed. IBEC states 36,000 completions a year are needed to keep up with the growth of the population, workers coming

from outside Dublin and regional centres where the crisis is hitting, and workers coming from other countries.

Private builders have a solution and they have an important role to play. Some of what they are building is not having the impact we thought it would. The reason high-density student accommodation is being built is because of the price of land. It is the only way some of them can make a profit but actually we need far more homes. The only solution is for the State to get building directly itself and increase the number of homes being made available to people.

Finland does not have a homeless crisis but had one in the past. It addressed it through the Government having its own construction company, which built sustainable housing. Denmark is another example. Here, in the past, when social housing was provided local authorities provided 30% of housing. I grew up in Cabra. My father's family were working people. They were not on the social housing list. They both had jobs when they got the house. Local authorities were providing housing for working people. Something we will have to do to address the crisis is have social housing not only for vulnerable families but also for working people on low incomes. This is the solution. If we really want to end the crisis this is what we need to do. We need to get building.

Professor Tony Fahey in UCD has done a lot of work in this area. The research now states big housing developments are a good thing. We used to think they were a bad thing because of places such as Tallaght and Ballymun. Why those places had the problems they did but do not have them now was because at that time, there was poor family support and not enough gardaí doing their job investigating crime. They are now rich and vibrant communities. Ballymun still has its problems but this is what the finding is. Where we have developments with just a small number for social housing and the rest for private housing we find that people in social housing get very isolated in bigger-scale developments. We need to rethink the housing solutions. They are all there and I hope we can do it.

Deputy Rabbitte is right that there are quick fixes to some of the problems families face. Families want the Leap card for the summer. Is there some way to do this? With regard to education, non-DEIS schools state they need home school liaison officers or teachers. A family will arrive and the principal will contact Focus Ireland because there is no one else to do it. The principal spends time doing this work to try to get a family into a home or stays late with the family in school trying to find a solution. This would be a quick fix for those schools, as would giving them the small budgets they need. They are not looking for big money. The principals have said if they had a small amount of money to make sure every child was fed or he or she could subsidise something that was needed it would give the child and the family some level of dignity.

Some schools have come up with some very good solutions to help families. Some of them got beanbags for children to sleep on because they noticed they were exhausted. They were being quite flexible. They created a room for children to have a little nap to catch up. We could give all schools the capacity to do this or support them in what the solutions might be. That could make a major difference to families. We are hearing feedback from some of our members, especially in the family support and early years areas. They want to provide more services but find it difficult to know where the children are. A mapping exercise needs to be done to ensure we know all the hubs where children are located and all the housing developments. For example, in a place like Clontarf all the local services have to be contacted and told the people are there so that they can start to provide the services or get the families into their services.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Does Ms Ward agree with me that we should have a complete call on Government at this point to draw a line in the sand in respect of the 22,000 units? I was listening to the Taoiseach the other day. He spoke about allocation and said it would not cause displacement. Do we need to draw a line at some stage and move on?

Ms Tanya Ward: The challenge is that the numbers will continue because the problem is in the rental market. Let us consider the recent report from Focus Ireland. The housing numbers are changing as are the reasons people are ending up homeless. When the rents go higher, families give up because they simply cannot afford it.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: They cannot afford it.

Ms Tanya Ward: Then they become homeless as a result. Without a doubt, getting houses built quickly is part of the answer. However I do not know whether it will address the underlying issues, which include the price of land and the price of rent at the moment.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Our focus must be the fact that we have children in hubs for longer than nine months at this stage. This is where the problem lies. It is becoming normal to say home is the hub. It was always supposed to be a transition. That is where the ask has to come from. How long can we expect a family to stay in a hub? That is having a detrimental effect on the whole well-being of families and everything else. Will Dr. Muldoon comment on hubs and child protection? That is my last question.

Dr. Niall Muldoon: I will build on what Ms Ward has said. From our point of view, obviously, if there is a quick way of getting children and families into new homes, then that is a fantastic achievement. From what I can see, unfortunately, the mix does not seem to be as good as we would like it to be. I hear of new units, but many of them are for student or buy-to-rent accommodation. These are smaller units with fewer facilities and less car parking. Those living there have no need for the same level of facilities as families. These units have different square footage. Families are not necessarily settling into these new units. They are not designed or being built in the way we would like. I doubt whether we would get the numbers we want in the right places.

That is one crucial part of future planning. It is okay to say we are getting 22,000 new units but are they units that will eradicate this in future? Will they ensure we are stocked up for the future? Much of this accommodation seems to be for students or well-paid young single professionals. The units going up at the moment seem to be for them.

We have to work towards removing the crisis. That is definitely a key point. We also need to remove the possibility of the crisis recurring. That is a longer-term argument. I agree with Deputy Rabbitte. The sooner we can get children and families into homes, the better. We have to see housing as a social good. That is the way it has to be. Housing is a social good and not a commodity. That is what we need to change for the future.

The only tool the Dublin Region Housing Executive has is the housing assistance payment scheme. That is what it uses to get people out of family hubs and into rental accommodation using their allowance. Straight away, we can see the landlord has all the power. They are the people who make the decisions.

We can see the problem outside of Dublin. Galway and Limerick have no rental accommodation any more. Cork is running out of rental accommodation. The HAP scheme is useless or not as good as it can be in those situations and we are relying on the private landlord, as Ms

Ward has said.

We have to get the State building again. We have to get control of those houses and get them built for the future so that we are working towards reducing the figure of 70,000 on the waiting list for general housing. That is a crucial part of the social good that we have to try to establish as a nation.

Ms Ward has referred to many of the short-term fixes. We recommend these fixes for child support workers in the hubs to help children and provide them with better facilities or opportunities to talk. We suggest therapeutic support should be available. It need not necessarily be in every hub but it should be available to children and families in this situation. We know that people are traumatised by becoming homeless. We have heard the eloquent words about people from different backgrounds becoming homeless. This is not what they expect or plan for. It is not what they want for themselves or their children. There is automatic trauma there and the longer people are subject to that trauma, the more difficult it is for them to come out of it. Therapeutic support would be fantastic as well.

The Departments of Education and Skills and Employment Affairs and Social Protection are now moving to bring 7,500 school dinners into a pilot scheme in September. That is an automatic thing. I do not know why we need the pilot. We are the last country in western Europe to bring hot meals into schools for free. The only good thing about it is that we now have a situation where everything is recyclable and the quality of food is high. It would be great to speed that up. That is a real joined-up approach and it will help every child without anyone being stigmatised for being the recipient. That is fantastic work. Ms Ward referred to the Leap card scheme for the summer. That is working well. However, we know there are major problems outside the Dublin area where people do not get a Leap card. It is far more complicated for a homeless family to get access to free transport there. We know about the community welfare scenario as well. Dr. McAuley may wish to comment if there is anything I have left out.

Dr. Karen McAuley: The broad points made by people so far are right. It is not only about quick fixes but measures to alleviate the trauma and stress on families. We need to consider the odds of it changing around and Ms Ward has spoken about that.

There is a broader point. Mike Allen from Focus Ireland was talking about this last week. He said the solution to homelessness is not emergency accommodation but rather housing and homes. One of the key things in broad terms is what may not necessarily be a solution but a response now. For example, we need to consider our reliance on the private rental sector in terms of facilitating families as far as possible to exit homelessness as quickly as possible. We do not see that as a solution in the longer term. It comes back to this idea of investing in housing as a social good and recognising it for what it is. Housing provides a fundamental human need for security and stability. We need investment in a scheme of public housing. I know that is not a response but in the longer term, it is a question of how we think about this. Emergency short-term measures are reactive and limited to what is possible right now, to a certain extent. We need to ensure we do not start speaking about them as long-term solutions, because they are not.

Senator Joan Freeman: I wish to apologise to everyone for being late. It was totally unavoidable. Forgive me if I make some comments that people have already made.

As some of the witnesses may know, I come from the real world in many ways. We need to be real. We do not know whether the people who are here today will be back again when there is another election. That is the reality. We do not know when there will be an election. It could

be the end of this year or next year. Most people will be back although I probably will not be.

What Deputy Rabbitte said was spot-on when she talked about a solution-focused approach. That is really and truly the only thing that works. Ms Ward came up with a really good comprehensive list of needs. That is something each of the committee members could take on board and fight for. What happens if we do not do that? We will leave this meeting today and probably file our reports but that will be the end of it. If we want to see solutions we have to go to the people who we believe will fight for us.

One area I am obviously interested in is mental health. I was busy last year with a particular campaign. One thing stopped me in my tracks. I was listening to a young girl being interviewed on the radio. She said that she dreads lifting the blanket from her body when she wakes up in the morning because she knows it is the start of another day. This was from a child in a hotel or bed and breakfast accommodation. That stopped me in my tracks. Reference was made to looking at mental health. Looking at it is one thing but what the hell is happening? What can we do? What can I do to help the Children's Rights Alliance and the Ombudsman for Children with that aspect of it? I might not be able to do anything but I believe we should be thinking about what this Government can do for the next six to eight months, because really that is all we have. Let us be real about it.

We can talk about legislation and introducing things into the Constitution but that is all long term. I have learned one thing from being here for three years. It has taken me three years to get a tiny tranche of legislation through the Seanad, and it is still not through the Dáil. Again, we need to be real about this.

Let us look at the issues that are concerning us now. Deputy Rabbitte mentioned the 25,000 homes. Dr. Muldoon said there was a mixture, including student accommodation. Let us find out what homes are available. If we cannot provide 1,700 with one, let us give 700 families a home. The witnesses should focus on certain members and get them to fight their fight. That is what we should do for the next six to eight months. I do not know if I even asked a question in all that waffling. While it is wonderful to listen to the witnesses, whose reports are comprehensive, we must be practical now. Does anyone want to respond to that?

Mr. Lewis Mooney: I might chime in on that and on Deputy Rabbitte's comments. It is not to undermine the short-term solutions to some of the problems that have been outlined by Tanya Ward and the Ombudsman, but there is a requirement for long-term thinking in this context. Senator Freeman referred to a general election. It is important that there is legal change and that rights are afforded to children which they can realise through the courts if necessary but so that they can also have those recognised by local authorities. While they are very important, short-term solutions are not going to fix the problem. The number of homeless families is increasing day by day. It requires a whole-of-Government approach and that Government really grasps the problem.

Senator Joan Freeman: Mr. Mooney is, of course, right that we need long-term solutions and to introduce legislation, but we are never going to have that perfect storm where everything falls together. We need to have solutions now for the 1,700 families who do not want to wait another two or three years to see what the Government will do. Let us focus on that while continuing to work in the background on legislation. I am not dismissing legislation. I am saying that at the same time those families should not hold their breath because we are waiting for the Government to take this a step further.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: A lot has been covered and I will not repeat it. There were a few things that jumped out of the presentations, however. One was the interviewing of children in the Ombudsman's report. Some children said "nothing" was their answer. That is really sad. It is important to read here the response of the ten year old girl who said: "Some days I didn't even want to wake up because I didn't want to face this day. I am tired in school. Some days I would just sit there and not even smile." That is heartbreaking and would be for any parent whose child felt like that. What do we do for that ten year old child? We know we have to build social and affordable housing. We cannot sit back and say "Let us do A, B, C and D" because there is another tranche coming in behind. There are people out there who cannot afford the rents. Unless we get into a proper programme, we need to build housing. The numbers are increasing every month. The Ombudsman's report refers also to the stigma and shame of being homeless. What can we do in the here and now for those 600 children in the hubs to ensure they do not feel shame and are not stigmatised. Is there anything we can do for those children who are going to school and do not even want to smile?

I note to Ms Ward that we went to the Minister again last week to ask for Leap cards. He said he has no plans to introduce a Leap card over the summer period. I find that horrific. It is something we can do here and now as a committee with responsibility for children and youth affairs. In that report, our teenagers say they feel isolated and excluded. As a committee, we need to contact the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and tell him we want these teenagers to be given this Leap card over the summer period. It will not make their lives fantastic. It will not get rid of their stigma. They will not be jumping around in happiness. However, it will help them in some way over the summer period so that they are not excluded and can take part in activities and meet their friends. It is something we can and should be doing when we leave the meeting.

There has been a great deal of talk about national standards for hubs. Can the witnesses expand on that and give the committee some examples of what they would like to see done? Does Ms Ward know whether any of the recommendations of the Home Works report have been implemented? If so, what has been implemented and what is outstanding?

Ms Tanya Ward: We have an engagement with the Minister for Education and Skills on the Home Works report. There was a Fianna Fáil-sponsored motion on it and we had discussions on the report with the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Zappone. We have had some good engagement with Tusla and the school completion programme under Noel Kelly. However, the key recommendations, in particular those to be led by the Department of Education and Skills, have not been implemented to date. Deputy Mitchell asked about solutions. The Leap card for the summer is a good solution which would help to reduce isolation. Geraldine Scanlon has discussed the need to use the provision of "July hours" to give schools the option of running programmes over the summer. That is because for the 1,000 families in emergency accommodation in particular the other issue is hunger. We do not have cooking facilities. While that is not something about which children think *per se*, one needs to think in terms of basics about the holiday hunger issues that will face children in the holiday period. Summer holidays are a drain for these families to try to get through and that needs to be addressed.

On mental health and well-being, this is being driven by the structural issues. Getting families into homes as soon as possible and reducing the amount of time in hubs and transitory accommodation is key. The reason for the time limit is to force the Government to build. That is one of the things we want to see. If there is a time limit, the Government must end the use of bed and breakfast homeless accommodation and get building. That is what we hope

the time limit will do as it has had that effect in other countries. Looking at the best solutions around mental health and well-being for children in these types of situations, in-school support is one of the better approaches. Some children like to have psychological support outside, but most want it in the school. It is about making sure those schools dealing with higher numbers of children who are homeless have the right number of psychologists to work with them. It is about supporting schools with the toolkit and techniques on emotional wellbeing. Things children could be doing include stillness, mindfulness and practices like that to help them get through what they are dealing with. Those kinds of techniques would make a major difference. Another solution is to have services working with children in the family hubs to provide those kinds of support. It is about ensuring children have play and recreation facilities where they can be normal children and young people. These things could make a major difference to their mental health and wellbeing.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: In his opening statement, the Ombudsman said he had written to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to request her to consider increasing the provision of practical supports, including child support workers. Did he receive a reply?

Dr. Niall Muldoon: The letter issued approximately ten days ago and I have had nothing back yet. I made the same request to the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government. Hopefully, the two Ministers are linking up on the matter to respond as efficiently as possible. The Deputy asked about standards as well. A lot of these hubs have fantastic play areas nearby and within their neighbourhoods, but many do not. We have said the standard should be that we will not allow anyone to go to a hub that does not have a childcare support worker, good play facilities, a therapeutic connection and easy access to schools. Those are the sorts of things to start creating now. Ireland has a history of creating an immediate solution that lasts for ten or 15 years. We do not want to mention examples of that again, but we need to get to a stage where we provide high-quality, short-term solutions. The target was to get people in and out of family hubs within three months. Emergency accommodation is a bigger issue. We need to start creating opportunities. As Ms Ward said and as the figures have shown, it is probably going to be 2022 or 2023 before the numbers level off. We could create a five-year contract for somebody. It does not have to be a full-time Civil Service job for life but we can put this system in place and provide supports. It is similar for the education system. Many of the extra supports do not have to be provided by a high-level psychologist and it could be therapists or child support workers. There are various ways to make sure that we make this happen in the immediate term and provide consistency around the country. People could be doing well in a particular hub in Dublin but other hubs are not as high quality and they are less consistent, less supportive and provide less access to what one needs even in terms of cooking facilities and stuff like that. A lot of them are glorified hotels that have installed extra washing and cooking facilities. It is those sort of things that we can start to do very quickly and move forward at the same time trying to create opportunities for people to get out of the hubs. I will pass the question on mental health scenarios on to my colleague.

Dr. Carmel Corrigan: I thank the Deputy for her comments on the report. Other aspects of the report are equally heartbreaking. One of the cases that comes to mind is the five-year old who tried to commit suicide and is being minded by his seven-year old sibling. There are children who find solace in school. The only thing they look forward to is going to school because it means leaving the facility. All of these issues have an impact on their mental health, which is compounded by a number of factors concerning accommodation such as a lack of space, a lack of facilities and exposure to other family stressors. The situation is compounded by their parents' sense of not being able to parent and cope. Children are ashamed and embarrassed and

parents feel like failures, which is not a healthy scenario for a child to spend any time in as part of a family. As Dr. Muldoon mentioned, we have argued for family support to be increased in the report. First, family support should be part of a solution because families, as a whole, in these situations need support. Child support workers are specifically needed to help children not necessarily deal with these issues on a day-to-day basis rather than a psychological level and to have meaningful activities and a little independence and normality. There should then be outreach therapeutic services for children who need more psychological or mental health intervention. I agree with Ms Ward and the Ombudsman for Children that having resources school is a good place to locate these resource but while I do not mean to be flippant, we are back to the Leap card situation. What does someone do for the three months of the summer if he or she has a child who is suffering with this?

We found that many children do not want to identify as homeless and their schools are unaware of their situation. As Ms Ward said, they may show up in dirty clothes or hungry but that may not be enough for the school to identify them as children living in these circumstances. We need to be cautious about where we locate services other than, and as well as, the school system.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I support the idea of a Leap card. We are delaying the notion of free travel anyway. A friend of mine pointed out that people pay for the bus to get to work to pay tax to pay for the bus so we are just delaying free travel. People using Leap card, particularly during the summer, would use the spare capacity of Dublin Bus and a card would help people who could not afford such travel. If the Minister does not make a move on this, it would be worth talking to Dublin Bus or the Luas provider directly. An Post, amidst its rebrand, has provided for homeless people in terms of postal services.

Many of the broader issues have been covered but I want to discuss LGBT homelessness. Focus Ireland was here last week but I did not get an opportunity to commend its work alongside BeLonG To in preparing research and data on LGBT homelessness in this State. It is a global issue. A recent study in the UK found that a quarter of young homeless people are LGBT. The Albert Kennedy Trust report found that 69% of young LGBT people reported that parental rejection was a reason for their homelessness. In 2013, the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection, Dr. Geoffrey Shannon, told the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children that LGBT people were highly represented among Ireland's homeless and "a targeted response is required". Are the witnesses conscious of the issue? A hostile family environment and stigma are more prevalent than we realise, particularly for young transgender people.

Dr. Niall Muldoon: It is not something that we have picked up on in a lot of the cases. Our direct consultations were with people who were much younger and in families. I cannot disagree with the figures. I can imagine the extra trauma that goes with that. If one has been forced out of one's home as a young person and trying to come to terms with one's sexuality and identity, it must add enormously to the trauma.

Dr. Carmel Corrigan: It is not something that specifically came to our attention during the consultations in any number at all. I appreciate that for all young people coming to terms with their sexuality, whatever that may be, is a transition period in their lives and it can be a difficult and challenging situation. For somebody trying to come to terms with that while living in a room with the rest of his or her family for a protracted period may pose particular and difficult challenges, particularly for the LGBTI community. It may be a particularly difficult scenario for young people who are dealing with that and expressing that to be in.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I agree.

Dr. Carmel Corrigan: The issue has not been raised directly with us. There were only 12 older children in this consultation so I would not in anyway contradict the Senator that it is an issue because it just was not prevalent in this particular group of children.

Ms Tanya Ward: The issue has come to the attention of the Children's Rights Alliance through our member organisations, including BeLonG To. They have told us that young people are not being represented in the general statistics because they do not out themselves. When they are asked to identify their reason for being homeless, family breakdown comes up as one but they do not say their families have kicked them out of home because they have just come out or their families have discovered something about them. The issue is, therefore, under reported and under counted, yet it is still prevalent. BeLonG To and the other organisations have said that these young people need specific supports to find a housing solution. Some of them could end up in the care system depending on their age.

Perhaps Mr. Mooney wants to talk about the issue from that perspective and whether these young people should be in aftercare as well. Tusla should provide these young people with supports such as residential lodgings, etc. Some of the solutions might look like that for some of these young people.

Mr. Lewis Mooney: It is not something that I have direct experience of in childcare proceedings. I certainly see that is probably an indirect or direct consequence that is not being spoken about.

Ms Tanya Ward: Yes.

Mr. Lewis Mooney: I could not speak to it myself.

Ms Tanya Ward: Alongside it, Travellers are another group. The Senator talked about quick solutions. The 30,000 Travellers are completely over-represented in the homeless statistics, particularly outside Dublin. There are many solutions that are not being exercised by the local authorities, with money not being spent. There may be something the committee could do. Accommodating Travellers would immediately result in a significant drop in the homeless statistics. We know from Focus Ireland that at one point they represented approximately 10% of new entrants in homeless accommodation. If the solutions were exercised and the State took control of the issue, it would have an immediate effect on the numbers.

Chairman: The State has an horrific record, specifically the local authorities in not spending the money they have been given. It is inexcusable and I have been saying it in my 15 years in politics.

The delegates have proposed this education support package for discussion. It is possibly one of the most significant things because it would be immediate and have a very obvious benefit. Deputy Mitchell and Senator Freeman spoke about supports. As far as I am aware - it might be very helpful this year - there is a significant €25 increase in the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance. I just wanted to make that point before Deputy Lisa Chambers came in.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: I apologise for missing the beginning of the meeting; we are all scheduled to deal with many things in these couple of days.

Obviously, the homelessness issue is different across the regions. I come from a rural constituency and see homelessness presenting in slightly different ways where we have families living with grandparents or many people in one house. We do not have hubs and for the most

part do not see people on the streets. There are some families who use vouchers for bed and breakfast accommodation. The local authorities are quite reluctant to go beyond five days at a push. In my office I frequently meet people who have been told to apply for the housing assistance payment and are asking for help in finding a property to rent. However, they are not available. The last time I searched *daft.ie* in the entire county of Mayo there were about 90 properties, even though it is a very large county. In some areas there were no properties available for rent, but there were a number of properties available on Airbnb. That is an issue not just in the cities but also beyond them. Are there specific solutions for rural communities in counties such as Mayo?

It is great when families come out of homelessness and are finally housed. On the follow-up with children who have spent a period in homelessness, there is stigma attached to it and the damage is done which they take with them. Is there any follow-up? Does it vary from county to county? I presume Tusla is responsible for that engagement.

My final suggestion came from a discussion about Leap cards. What to do with children during the summer is a problem for all parents, especially when it is raining and they do not have the routine of going to school every day. The parents who can afford to do so send their children to summer camps such as Cúl camps or Let's Go camps. This gives them routine as they are gone in the morning and back in the afternoons, a little like school. People who are homeless obviously do not have the resources to do so. Perhaps as a short-term measure for families living in hubs, bed and breakfast accommodation or hotels a grant or money could be made available to allow the children to participate in the summer camps we all attended when we were children.

Dr. Niall Muldoon: I think it is a fantastic idea to find some way for children and young people to become engaged with summer camps. We are aware that some of the hubs have connections with voluntary organisations that allow that to happen in the local area. Most of them are outside Dublin, in which there are one or two. It is happening locally, but it could easily be moved forward on a national level.

The committee has discussed making more use of school facilities outside school terms. That might provide opportunities for all children, not just those who are homeless. If the playground was available or some supervised activity was allowed in the gymnasium - there are facilities that are unused for two or three months - we could possibly use them in different ways. They are great ideas.

On the issue of quick fixes in hubs, one of the children suggested to us that for teenagers who could not move from their bedroom to the television room or the study without their parents and other children coming with them, we could provide perhaps a university student to oversee a teenage room in order that the parents would not have to supervise every child all the time. That is the lack of privacy they experience in hubs. It is something we could do quickly.

I am fully aware of the rural homelessness. Each local authority does it differently. Donegal County Council only allows a maximum of three days' bed and breakfast accommodation.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: It is generally the same in County Mayo, but we have been able to push it in certain circumstances. There is discretion.

Dr. Niall Muldoon: Again, there is a lack of standardisation which adds to the sense of shame and guilt. They are hiding it because their local authority will not even recognise their

need in the same way that they-----

Deputy Lisa Chambers: Effectively they have to beg for a bed.

Dr. Niall Muldoon: I have spoken to people in Galway. People are moving to where other facilities can be made available to them. Again, that changes the nature of the demographics and the supports available to the children also. That needs to be taken into consideration. I do not have a set answer to that question.

The follow-up is crucial. Last week I spoke to the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government about the psychological impact of the first 1,000 days of homelessness for all children. For a child who spends even 12 months in homelessness as a baby, the follow-up needs to be almost as long to ensure they will get back on track as quickly as possible. Dr. Nowicki wrote in the *Geographical Journal* about children and families who had come out of homelessness and found a new place in which to live. They were still feeling the impact of trauma, the shame and guilt. They will not go away for a long time and the parents will carry them even longer than the children. They still need to be acknowledged, recognised and worked with in order to come out of it. It is important to find a way. I do not know if one agency has taken this on board. There has been so much work done in getting them out that nobody has thought about the aftercare element. It will be an important part for the future.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: The Tusla children and young persons services committees, CY-PSCs, do great work on a localised basis. Each co-ordinator has significant autonomy in how he or she runs the committee for the county or district. Perhaps we might write to Tusla and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs about the matter for children coming out of homelessness.

Dr. Karen McAuley: I wish to make two points about rural homelessness, although I appreciate others have more expertise on the specifics. If housing is not available in rural communities, whether it is provided by the local authority or otherwise, how can we prevent families from having to present as homeless in the first place? Can further measures be taken to minimise the necessity for any family having to do so, whether it be a change to the legislation or otherwise, short term or otherwise? I appreciate the point about taking immediate measures to alleviate the position for families who are experiencing homelessness now.

Going back to the legislation, as I know members of the committee appreciate, the provision of emergency accommodation for families and others in whatever form it takes is at the discretion of the local authority. In the longer term it is about legislating to create an obligation to require the local authorities to provide accommodation and supports for people, including families, who present as homeless. I know, as we all do, that that is not the solution right now, but it is really important that those legislative changes happen alongside the taking of immediate measures.

Mr. Lewis Mooney: A number of calls from children suffering from homelessness have been made to the Children's Rights Alliance access to justice helpline. The number of people in rural communities calling to gain information is much larger than it is Dublin. The support and information services are not as developed in these communities, which compounds the problem.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: I agree. It is perceived as an urban or city issue, but it is now being seen in rural communities also. My colleagues in other rural constituencies are saying the

numbers presenting in their offices with this problem are increasing.

Ms Tanya Ward: The higher number of children living in poverty is actually in rural communities where incomes are lower. This makes it more difficult for families to compete for private rented accommodation if rents are increasing. On the western seaboard, I hope the Airbnb measures will make a difference. Part of the problem, particularly in Galway, is that many properties are being used to provide accommodation for tourists when they could be made available in the long-term rental sector.

The countries that have been most successful in addressing housing crises are the ones in which the state has built more public housing for working people and vulnerable groups. On the issue of urban Ireland versus rural Ireland, local councils need to build their expertise and funds, as well as the accommodation stock.

There is a range of aftercare supports provided by homeless services. Focus Ireland does a lot of work with families when they come out of homelessness, for example. One of the challenges for such a family is the having the ability to hold down a home as they could have become institutionalised when in the homeless services. Simon Communities does this with single people who have gone through addiction, emotional or mental health issues. However, some families do not need that support and are resilient. They might spend a shorter time homeless and get out of it quickly. However, there are others, particularly those who are homeless for longer, who tend to be more vulnerable. There is probably a need for a mapping of services versus need. The Deputy is correct that the children and young people's services committees, CYPSCs, are the ideal location for it.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: They are undertaking that mapping in some CYPSC areas. It would be a good one for them on which to focus.

Ms Tanya Ward: Resources could be put in through the services. What comes from some members is that they do not know where the children are. Sometimes the State tries to hide the emergency accommodation options because it is afraid there will be a kickback.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: An influx.

Ms Tanya Ward: It is afraid that the media will highlight the fact that a hotel has homeless families and tourists will not want to go there. There is a range of issues. It means that the well funded services which could make a significant difference are not necessarily getting to the families in need.

On the issue of school completion, we know from research carried out by Geraldine Scanlon and Grainne McKenna for Children's Rights Alliance, with the support of the Community Foundation for Ireland, that their long-term educational prospects could be affected by homelessness. There is a need to bring in the educational welfare services to work with these families early on. A child might only need support for several months and then in mainstream education. Someone somewhere needs to make an assessment and follow through to ensure there are no issues that a child will not be left vulnerable.

Chairman: On behalf of the committee, I thank the delegates for their presentations and dealing with members' questions comprehensively. It was proposed that two letters be sent. Is it agreed that they be drafted and sent in due course? Agreed.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.55 a.m. until 1 p.m. on Tuesday, 9 July 2019.