

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM LEANAÍ AGUS GNÓTHAÍ ÓIGE

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

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*Dé Máirt, 9 Iúil 2019*

*Tuesday, 9 July 2019*

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The Joint Committee met at 1 p.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Lisa Chambers,	Lorraine Clifford-Lee,
Denise Mitchell,	Fintan Warfield.
Tom Neville,	
Jan O'Sullivan,*	
Anne Rabbitte.	

\* In éagmais / In the absence of Deputy Sean Sherlock.

Seanadóir / Senator Catherine Noone sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Business of Joint Committee**

**Clerk to the Committee:** In the absence of the Chairman and the Vice Chairman, the first item of business is the nomination of an Acting Chairman. May we have nominations for the position?

**Deputy Tom Neville:** I propose Senator Noone.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I second that proposal.

**Clerk to the Committee:** As there are no other nominations, I ask Senator Noone to take the Chair.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** I propose that we go into private session to deal with some housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

*The joint committee went into private session at 1.05 p.m. and resumed in public session at 1.20 p.m.*

### **Impact of Homelessness on Children: Discussion (Resumed)**

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** I welcome committee members and viewers who may be watching our proceedings on Oireachtas TV. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss with officials of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, the impact of homelessness on children. On behalf of the joint committee, I welcome from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government Ms Mary Hurley, assistant secretary and Mr. David Kelly, principal officer, housing delivery division; from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs Mr. Albert O'Donoghue, principal officer, alternative care policy; and from Tusla Mr. Jim Gibson, chief operations officer, and Mr. Cormac Quinlan, director of transformation and policy.

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 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, delegates and those in the Visitors Gallery to turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode as they may interfere with the sound system, even when left in silent mode.

I advise delegates that any submission or opening statement made to the committee will be

published on its website after the meeting. After their presentations, there will be questions from members of the committee. I call on Ms Hurley to make her opening statement.

**Ms Mary Hurley:** I thank the joint committee for the invitation to discuss the impact of homelessness on children. I am accompanied by my colleague Mr. David Kelly, principal officer with responsibility for the homelessness area in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. In terms of context, it is important to note that the Department is responsible for the provision of a national framework of policy, legislation and funding to underpin the role of housing authorities in addressing homelessness. Statutory responsibility for the provision of accommodation and related services rests with the housing authorities. Accordingly, the Department does not fund any service directly, but it does provide funding for housing authorities to meet up to 90% of the costs incurred by them. A substantial proportion of the funding is provided for services provided by non-governmental organisations which are contracted by housing authorities. They include emergency and supported accommodation arrangements, daytime services, outreach services and tenancy sustainment.

The response to resolving the issue of homelessness requires a multi-agency approach. A number of other Departments and agencies are responsible for delivering supports to families and their children who are experiencing homelessness. They include the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Tusla, the HSE and the Department of Education and Skills. In September 2017 the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, established the homelessness inter-agency group to ensure services for individuals, families and their children were provided in a coherent and co-ordinated manner. The group is chaired by Mr. John Murphy, former Secretary General of the then Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.

The root cause of the increase in homelessness is the shortage of supply across the housing sector. Key to resolving the issue of homelessness will be increasing the supply of social housing. Rebuilding Ireland, the Government's action plan on housing and homelessness, has been designed to accelerate all types of housing supply, including social, private and rental. During the lifetime of the plan some 50,000 new social houses will be provided, supported by an Exchequer investment of more than €6 billion, with 87,000 other housing supports delivered in the six years from 2016 to 2021, inclusive. In addition, housing output generally will be progressively increased towards the target of producing 25,000 houses per year through all channels. The plan provides for early solutions to address the high number of households in emergency accommodation such as the delivery of independent tenancies under the various social housing support programmes. It includes the delivery of an increased social housing supply under new build, acquisition and refurbishment schemes. Independent tenancies are provided for homeless households in the private rented sector through the provision of housing supports such as the enhanced housing assistance payment.

The Department is working with the housing authorities to minimise the use of hotels for families who require emergency accommodation through the development of family hubs. Family hubs offer a more suitable form of emergency accommodation, with better facilities for families with children, including cooking and laundry facilities and more recreational space. Families in hubs are supported by the service provider to identify and secure an independent tenancy, including a tenancy in a local authority property, a property provided by an approved housing body or a tenancy in the private rented sector supported by the housing assistance payment. Family hubs are very much a short-term solution and not intended for long-term use.

In April the Office of the Ombudsman for Children published the report, No Place Like Home, on the experiences of children and the parents of young children in family hubs. The

Minister subsequently met the Ombudsman for Children to discuss it. The Department is examining the recommendations made in the report in consultation with the homelessness inter-agency group. The examination also involves consultation with NGO service providers which operate the hubs.

The latest homelessness report published by the Department is for May. It shows that during that month 1,700 families with 3,749 children or other dependants were accessing emergency accommodation. I assure the committee that delivering a housing solution for each of these families is an absolute priority for the Department. We are fully committed to ensuring the appropriate policy and funding framework is in place to deliver these solutions. In 2018 more than 5,000 adults exited homelessness into an independent tenancy. Our priority is to ensure exits to tenancies for each of the families and other households in emergency accommodation. Moreover, prevention initiatives such as the HAP placefinder service work with households at risk of homelessness to identify solutions to ensure they will not have to enter emergency accommodation. For example, in Dublin, approximately half of the families who present to homeless services each month are prevented from having to enter emergency accommodation. We also see significant numbers exiting emergency accommodation every month. In Dublin, in the first five months of the year, a total of 437 families entered emergency accommodation for the first time. However, during this period 462 families were prevented from entering emergency accommodation, while 404 exited emergency accommodation through the creation of 866 new tenancies.

My colleagues and I are happy to discuss these and other issues and answer questions members may have.

**Mr. Albert O'Donoghue:** I thank the joint committee for the invitation to attend to discuss matters related to homelessness. As members are aware, responsibility for addressing homelessness rests with colleagues in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. That said, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, as well as colleagues in Tusla and others across the wider span of government service provision, are anxious to assist in any way they can. The Department has taken a number of steps, working within its remit, to help in alleviating the difficulties experienced by children and families who are homeless. Representatives of the Department participate in the homelessness implementation action group of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, as well as attending sub-group meetings about homeless children and families. Through one of the sponsor groups under the Department's Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures policy, we examine the overall provision of services in various Departments, including the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

The Department provides direct support in the context of a specific childcare scheme for children experiencing homelessness. Free childcare is provided for these children, with a daily meal for each child. Some 365 children have been registered for the scheme in the current programme year, 2018-19. The Department, with the assistance of colleagues in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, has succeeded in having young adults leaving State care included as a distinct category for funding under the capital assistance scheme. It provides targeted assistance for the most vulnerable of care leavers by enabling approved housing bodies to acquire residential units to accommodate them. Tusla, the local authorities and approved housing bodies are working to source additional accommodation for this cohort under the capital assistance scheme.

Tusla is included in the Vote of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. To provide a flavour of other responses to homelessness under the Vote, I reference a number of headline

actions being advanced by Tusla. I am sure delegates from it will provide additional detail during the course of our discussion. Tusla, through the family resource centres, is supporting the provision of facilities where homeless children and families can avail of a safe and warm environment for homework, relaxation, etc. It also assists families who are experiencing problems with school attendance under the school completion programme. It works closely with the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, with staff providing expertise on child welfare and protection matters, with educational welfare and domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services. While Departments and agencies work towards solutions to the challenges presented by homelessness, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, with colleagues in Tusla, will continue to offer a range of supports to assist those who are coping with such difficulties.

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** I thank the joint committee for giving me the opportunity to address it to discuss issues pertaining to the impact of homelessness on children. I am conscious of the time and will refer to the key elements of my opening statement.

The agency views homeless as a devastating and unacceptable reality for many families in Ireland. As the State agency established to promote the welfare of children, we urgently advocate for the need for a long-term solution to the crisis. We are committed to supporting children, parents and communities in dealing with the impact of homelessness on their lives. We see and recognise the courage and resilience of parents and their extended families in supporting their children in the most challenging circumstances and, with our partner agencies, wish to support this intent and ensure supports are provided at the earliest stage to help families and children to avoid experiencing even more difficulties in the future. The short and long-term effects of homelessness on children are well documented and evidenced. The effects span from early childhood right through to adolescence and early adulthood. Homelessness deprives children of the most basic rights, opportunities and things than many of us take for granted in our lives. While the agency does not have a direct role in the provision of housing or accommodation for homeless families, we provide a range of services from prevention and early intervention through to child welfare and protection. At all times we seek to help and support children and families to live happy and fulfilled lives and, where difficulties arise, to support them. We seek to manage these difficulties in order that children are not harmed. This, of course, can be more challenging when families are homeless and their ability to maintain connection to the extended family and support networks is diminished. Our goal is to maintain the integrity of the family while others seek to assist them in finding longer-term housing. Of course, there are occasions where an immediate risk is identified and in those situations there is an immediate protective response.

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, is involved in a wide range of integrated approaches and fora. We are committed to those actions in Rebuilding Ireland which are relevant to the agency. We work in partnership with the Dublin Region Homeless Executive. We provide funding to non-governmental organisations across Ireland. We work with the homelessness interagency group, which was established by the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government with senior representation from the key State organisations with a role to play in respect of homelessness. We are involved with the joint consultative forum with the Dublin Region Homeless Executive. We also offer some help and support mechanisms to children and families.

While housing and accommodation are not within our remit, we are committed to working collaboratively with key partners to ensure children receive the help and support they require. Tusla provides a wide range of supports and pathways for families experiencing homelessness.

This is done through early intervention and family supports, established family support networks throughout Ireland, and our educational welfare services. We use the children and young people's service committees to assist us, together with our family resource centre network, as there are 120 family resource centres around Ireland.

Tusla recognises the huge challenges facing, and the resilience of, parents and children and the essential need for extended families and naturally occurring networks to minimise the impact on children and to maintain connections. We are committed to supporting children and families across all levels of need. We are present in every community and work collaboratively with other organisations to support children and families within a community setting.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** I thank the witnesses for their presentations. I have some questions for the Department. Ms Hurley mentioned the interagency groups that were established. What do these interagency groups do after shelter has been provided? What is the current position in respect of reducing lists and delivering housing? Will Ms Hurley update us on the prevention teams and the additional placefinder posts for the housing assistance payment, HAP? How is that measure developing? What can be improved? Where is it working well? With regard to emergency accommodation or rough sleepers, for my own education, how are issues of mental health, comorbidity, and addiction dealt with in hostels and emergency accommodation? I may have supplementary questions but I would like Ms Hurley to deal with those first.

**Ms Mary Hurley:** I will take the questions in order. With regard to the interagency group, it is very clear that homelessness is a very complex issue and that a multistranded approach is required. That is why the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, established a homelessness interagency group, which comprises all of the key stakeholders and players in the game with regard to delivering services. As I alluded to in my statement, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government's role relates to the provision of quality accommodation suitable for families and homeless individuals, but the wrap-around supports and the roles other agencies play in providing supports in respect of education, health and children are also very important. All of the key stakeholders are at the table in the interagency group, which is chaired by Mr. John Murphy. A report was provided to the Minister and the Cabinet last year, which set out a range of recommendations for improved co-ordination and coherence in State delivery. Mr. O'Donoghue has alluded to this. We are working very closely with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs with regard to supports. We also work with Tusla. The interagency group has been a really useful forum in advancing a range of activities. Our colleagues in the Departments of Justice and Equality and Education and Skills are also represented on the group. We can tease out a range of issues regarding practical delivery and progress them through the group. Housing is just one piece. People who are homeless experience many other issues.

With regard to reducing our lists, housing supply, which is very much linked to delivery, is critical to addressing homelessness. That is why we have a very ambitious programme of delivering social housing under Rebuilding Ireland. We are now seeing building activity really ramping up. This means that we have homes for people on our housing list and for our homeless clients. Last year there were eight times as many units built as in the years before Rebuilding Ireland. We are seeing this translate to a reduction in housing waiting lists. We have seen a reduction of 22% in the number on social housing waiting lists. As I pointed to in my statement, we are also seeing individuals in homeless accommodation exiting homelessness. Unfortunately, we still face the challenge of people and families coming through the door. The Minister recently brought a range of measures through the Dáil. These include reform of the rental sector and the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019. These will go some way



towards addressing some of the challenges people face in the rental market. We are seeing an increase in delivery, in the number of families being allocated homes and in exits.

The challenge for us is to continue our prevention measures, to which the Deputy referred. We have put in place new homelessness support officers who are working with the Dublin Region Homeless Executive to support families in hotel accommodation in exiting that accommodation and to give them advice about their options. Separately we have a housing assistance payment placefinder in place. The members will probably have heard about this. Some 23 local authorities now have HAP placefinders. These are individuals in the local authority who assist families or individuals in finding private rented accommodation. A range of measures are under way. It is not a case of either one or the other. As I said earlier, the delivery programme will deliver 10,000 homes this year. Families are also being supported through the housing assistance payment and the rental accommodation scheme. They complement each other. We are using all of the measures we can to address homelessness and to find homes for people.

I will refer to the rough sleepers, about whom the Deputy asked, and the accommodation we provide for them. We have a range of hostels. We recently opened another 100 beds. We are constantly adding to our stock in terms of emergency beds for homeless single individuals. A key priority and critical delivery mechanism of the Housing First programme, which again ties in with the interagency approach, is to transition somebody who is in a hostel into independent living with all the wrap-around supports for mental health and addiction issues from our colleagues in the Department of Health.

We are seeing progress with delivery but we need to do more. Up to 10,000 homes this year will be delivered. As we get towards the end of Rebuilding Ireland, we will be delivering 12,000 homes annually. That will go out beyond 2027. Those homes are much needed for families and people on our waiting lists. The waiting lists are reducing. We have seen them go down from in excess of 91,000 to just 71,000. Our priority will be to continue to exit as many families and homeless individuals as we possibly can out of emergency accommodation. While we know emergency accommodation is not good for people, we also know it is necessary until our supply ramps up and we find homes for individuals.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** Several recommendations were made in the report on wrap-around and interagency supports. Were all of those implemented? If not, how many are left and which ones are they? How often are these recommendations revised? Obviously, this is quite a dynamic and fluid area, meaning there would have to be an evaluation process. What is that evaluation process? Are there surveys or feedback as part of this evaluation process?

Ms Hurley spoke about the place finder service and housing assistance payment, HAP. Is there some sort of checking of compliance when it comes to HAP? From my experience, 99% of landlords are above board, namely, that everything is fine and the tenants have no problems. However, I have had people on HAP coming to my constituency office who have been in conditions which have not been flagged with the local council. The local authority has been unable proactively to find these places. It was up to me to make a representation on behalf of the constituent to highlight this. That then involves going through two-week, eight-week and two-week processes, respectively. Has the Department any plans to beef up this side of it? There is an endgame regarding accommodation which needs to be brought up to speed. Once they are brought up to speed, those resources can then be put into something else. It is quite dynamic. Are there any plans around that? It is difficult to combat landlords who refuse to take people on HAP and on the housing list. Are there any views on that?

On comorbidity, mental health issues, addiction and substance abuse in hostels for rough sleepers, what type of hostels are they? Are they open plan or do they have separate rooms? I have asked rough sleepers about this and I get mixed responses. People might be reluctant to go into a hostel because they may be recovering from addiction and feel they may be mixing in an environment which might not be good for them or their mental health. Have any studies been done on this?

**Ms Mary Hurley:** We are conscious of the inspections and the provision of quality accommodation through HAP. There is an inspection regime in place and HAP properties have to meet the quality standards and requirements of rental legislation. We have done some work around this with the Local Government Management Agency, LGMA, on the rate of inspections. We wanted to ensure a significant amount of the required inspections were done. We did this piece of work earlier this year and up to 83% of the required inspections have been carried out. We are following up with local authorities who have not done the required amount of inspections. They are done on a risk basis and they are targeted. We are reviewing them constantly and the properties have to meet rental standards. We have put additional resources into local authorities with the inspection regime. We have done an exercise on monitoring the level of inspections to ensure local authorities are doing the required number.

There was a series of recommendations on the wrap-around services and interagency report. We can provide the Deputy with an update on each of those recommendations.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** I am not looking for a micro-analysis of it. I just want to get an overall view to see if all of those recommendations were implemented.

**Ms Mary Hurley:** They are in the process of being implemented. Some of them are complete while others are more ongoing and long term. For instance, there is a national director of Housing First in place. There are protocols in place for our work with the Department of Justice and Equality on youth offenders. We have a range of supports and have brought forward a range of services with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Capital assistance scheme, CAS, funding is now provided to support youth homelessness services.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** Is there a timeline as to when all of these recommendations will be implemented?

**Ms Mary Hurley:** Obviously, we would like to have them implemented as soon as possible. Some of them are continuous, meaning that we want them implemented as soon as possible. Half of them are implemented but some of them are ongoing.

In monitoring the implementation of that particular plan, it is an area in which the Taoiseach has taken an interest, meaning regular updates are provided at Cabinet committee level. The work of all of the Departments together is reflected in these fora. It is being monitored at government level. The monitoring in the Department is independently chaired by John Moran, a former Secretary General, who reports to our Minister.

For rough sleepers, we have a range of hostels and facilities. Over recent years, approximately 500 additional beds have been put into the system. As we move forward, we are modernising all of our hostels. There are a range of supports and services in place in those hostels through which people can receive medical supports and engage with mental health and addiction counsellors. We have an ongoing programme of refurbishment of our existing hostels but also an expansion programme in terms of the number of units.



For the mental health aspect, the Housing First programme is critical. In terms of mental health supports within the structures and hostels, people receive support for mental health issues and addiction. They regularly would have HSE intervention. The local authorities would also work with them in putting in the required supports.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** I just want to raise one other issue.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** I have to move on to Deputy Rabbitte.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** I just want to clarify that the majority of landlords and tenants I meet are complying with HAP. I was referring earlier to a small cohort.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I thank the witnesses for their presentations. Tusla stated, “While the agency does not have a direct role in the provision of housing accommodation for homeless families, we provide a range of services”. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs stated: “As members of the committee are aware, responsibility for addressing homelessness rests with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.” Then the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government replied that it was important to note that the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government is responsible for the provision of a national framework policy, legislation and funding to underpin the role of housing authorities in addressing homelessness. It stated that statutory responsibility lies with the housing authorities. There is one group missing in front of me today and that is the local authorities, because that is where the statutory responsibility lies. It is not until we see the presentation and read through it that we realise where it lies.

Deputy Neville asked some interesting questions. I do not intend to go back over them but I would like to know how often all these various Departments meet? In September 2017, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, established the homeless interagency group. We know he presented details of the group in 2018. Since the 2018 presentation, which was last June, how many times has the group met? I have no figures. The whole presentation, while excellent, is wordy. I do not have one figure to back up one thing. I am seeking a response to that question.

**Mr. David Kelly:** The group meets approximately every two months.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** Who sits on that group? When was the last time the group met? How many times this year has the group met?

**Mr. David Kelly:** The last meeting was in June. I think the previous meetings were in April and February, but I can send on the details.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** That is okay. What Departments sit at that meeting?

**Mr. David Kelly:** The list includes the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, the Department of Health, the HSE, the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, the County and City Management Association, and the Department of Education and Skills.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** What about the Department of Children and Youth Affairs?

**Mr. David Kelly:** Yes, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Tusla and the Department of Justice and Equality are all involved. I think that is about it.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** It is important to know that is up and running. Who is responsible for gathering the data? Does Tusla gather the data on children? Is there mandatory reporting where there are welfare issues? Do calls come into the Tusla offices? How does Tusla gather the data? Do county council officials pick up the telephone? Do school staff pick up the telephone? Does Tusla get calls to the various family resource centres and offices in the various regions? Do calls come in? Are data being gathered?

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** Our response was to appoint a homeless liaison officer who would be the connection to enhance integration for families who present as homeless either in emergency accommodation or in the hubs. These are the interim solutions to homelessness. We pick up and strengthen our integration with the key organisations mentioned in providing and signposting help and support services. We also spent time training personnel within the hubs throughout the country on referral pathways into Tusla. As the State agency for child protection and welfare, we would never wish the connection between homelessness and child protection, but our staff involved with homeless families have the pathway and know the referral pathways for a child protection issue, if it arises.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I will go back to my question again. I now know that Tusla has one designated person with supports in various hubs. Where are the data being collected?

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** Does the question relate to families referred as homeless?

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** Yes, those referred as homeless or schools or GPs referring families too. Where are the data being gathered? What families are being flagged?

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** We have specific metrics that the Deputy is aware of and we have presented to the committee on the matters we receive. We do not count homelessness at this juncture. If there is a child protection issue, then it is about the needs of the child relating to abuse or neglect.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** With the height of respect, is welfare not part of child protection issues?

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** Yes.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** Are the welfare of the child, where the child sleeps, having a roof over his or her head and having proper sustainable meals welfare issues?

**Mr. Cormac Quinlan:** As the Deputy is aware, we produce quarterly and annual reports on the services we provide and particular metrics. We report on categories of child abuse cases and welfare cases in our responses. Most people who are referred to us are not referred on the issue primarily of homelessness. They are referred on the impact of homelessness on the child. They may identify that a child has a particular need or that a parent needs a particular family support. We publish information on the number of family support services we provide and the number of families in family support services as well as the number of children.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** That is exactly what I am looking for. What does Tusla do with that information when the calls come in? Tusla gathers the data. What about the person who has made that telephone call? Is there interagency collaboration with the local authority?

**Mr. Cormac Quinlan:** Absolutely, there is interagency co-operation.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** That is exactly what I am looking for.

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** I will describe what we have invested in during the past five years. We developed our professional partnership and family support services. We believe they are well positioned to assist and help families who find themselves in homelessness and emergency accommodation, for example, a hotel environment or a family hub. The homeless liaison officer is the link to services that we have already established. Throughout Ireland we have family support networks that are multidisciplinary. We have interagency fora that fit into the child and young persons services committees. We have numerous support people in our organisation throughout Ireland and in the major cities. That is where we see the important connection for families. We should remember that these families are respectable, resilient and resourceful. They have good parents with clear attachments and bonds with their children. What they need is help in the circumstances they find themselves in.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** Absolutely.

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** The circumstances may include no place to play or cook, which are important things. We work with strategic partners throughout Ireland to ensure families can have somewhere to go to do basic things like wash clothes or have space for homework clubs or other activities. In the emergency hotel environment parents are often trying to keep their children quiet and they cannot play. They are in confined spaces. The parents do not have private space to have a discussion about things.

We work through our family support network, which is very well established. We gave information to the committee previously. We have 120 family support networks. We have family support co-ordinators who engage with families who are homeless. We listen to those in families who are homeless. They do not want a flag up saying they are homeless. The report of the Ombudsman for Children included testimony from children who spoke about their experiences of being homeless. They spoke of shame and how they managed that within a day-to-day setting. We work with our educational welfare service, the school completions programme and the home school community liaison services. Where there is reporting of school non-attendance, we are sympathetic. We work with parents and engage with them in resolving the problems of non-attendance at school. The family support services are set up to listen to parents and children as opposed to prescribing how we can fix the challenges they have in homelessness. Deputy Rabbitte will be aware of the My World Triangle that we use as a methodology to engage with parents and children about how they perceive their needs and describe their needs to us. We describe what services are available that we can connect them with to assist them in any of the issues they experience.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I thoroughly agree on everything Mr. Gibson is saying and that is as is. There is no issue there. I will go back to my issue again. How does Tusla engage with the local authorities? They have the statutory responsibility for delivery.

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** We engage with homeless families where they present.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** Does Tusla engage with local authorities?

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** Of course, yes. We have people who are involved with the local authorities and who sit on Rebuilding Ireland fora and make commitments to those actions as well. There is a highly integrated interagency approach. We are clear in those fora about our role. Our role is to help families who are homeless. We advocate strongly. Social workers and social care workers throughout Ireland advocate strongly for families who are homeless by writing to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection or the local authorities. They

write in support of their clients' requirements and housing needs.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** What feedback do Tusla support workers get from parents who engage and who are involved in hubs?

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** I have highlighted in the written statement to the Oireachtas how we view the interim measure of hubs as a valuable step in the right direction. It grounds children and families in a place where we can ensure that, from a support and helping perspective, they continue to have connection with their community and we can arrange schooling. One good initiative was the Leap card for families who are homeless to help the children to get to school. The educational welfare service negotiates with schools on different starting and leaving times. We also accommodate parents who bring children so they are not standing outside the gate. They should have somewhere comfortable to wait for their children as that wait might be for an hour or so. We are clear that hubs are a worthwhile interim measure that allow us to provide stability to families and to create the pathways to the universal services any family requires, including primary care within the HSE and co-ordinated family support services in the community.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** The word was "interim". What does the Department see as an interim measure for families in hubs? We have had so many presentations here and everyone was saying six months was as long as they should be there. What statistics does the Department have? How long are families having to live in hubs and what is the pathway for them?

**Ms Mary Hurley:** It depends on the particular family. We have 27 hubs in place catering for approximately 660 families. In some hubs, the move-on rate is anything between two and three months. However, some families stay a bit longer, perhaps over six months, where they are getting supports and services in the hubs and are not moving on as quickly. We are working with them, which is why we have place finders and supports within the hubs to help people find accommodation. When someone goes into a hub, we work with them intensely on the day they enter to give them the suite of options in terms of move-on so that they can get a longer-term tenancy. There is that engagement. Some of them move on more quickly than others. Some families have complex issues and remain in the hub. They have wrap-around supports there and it takes a little bit longer to provide specialist accommodation for that group. However, we are seeing move-ons from three months. We are seeing that families move out of hubs after between three and six months generally. However, there are families who stay in hubs longer because we have to tailor particular solutions for them. For example, it can be challenging to find accommodation for larger families.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** I am continuing on from Deputy Rabbitte's contribution to an extent. Mr. Gibson mentioned the report of the Ombudsman for Children, which shows clearly the long-term damage done to children who spend any time in homeless services, whether that is a hub or hotel. Indeed, there have been other reports as well. It is not just that they feel ashamed that they are in a hub, they are restricted in terms of their physical growth and ability to socialise and all of the other things that are so important to a child. I do not know whether Mr. Gibson can answer the following but does Tusla have a position on whether there should be a limit on the time children spend in homelessness services? That might well be a policy area on which he cannot comment, but I would have thought that as Tusla is the body that looks after the welfare of children, it has a position on it. My concern is that more and more we are seeing a focus on managing homelessness rather than on eradicating it and I will come to the departmental officials on that in a few minutes. At this stage we have had many recommendations that there should be time limits. When *Rebuilding Ireland* was first published, it was meant to end the use of hotels by the following July.

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** Our opening statement made clear the devastating and unacceptable consequences of homelessness for children. The Deputy asked whether there is a policy statement on an acceptable time for children and families to be in a homelessness space. We do not have a policy on that but we would like the situation eradicated from Ireland as quickly as possible. We see the hub as an interim measure and probably the best base solution at this juncture. We feel we could build on that to ensure, most importantly, that children's lives are maintained within the communities in which their homes have been made. We want those children and their families accommodated back within the communities where they have extended family, schools and friends and where their sporting interests and hobbies can be reignited. That is really important. We do not have a policy on the duration but perhaps we should look at that internally and in collaboration with other State agencies. We all accept that it is a dreadful place for children and families to be. The services we have are tailored to engage with children and families to listen to them and assist them to define their challenges and complexities in a manner that does not diminish their independence within a state of homelessness. That is vital for us from the perspective of our mission and our values in Tusla and it is reflected in our child protection services. Our Signs of Safety strategy is about engagement with children and families and helping them to find solutions within that dialogue and practice framework.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** If Tusla can push the boat out in terms of its own responsibility to develop a policy in that area, I would appreciate it. It is vital that we have that pressure, which is also coming from other sources, to get people, in particular families and the 3,740 children listed as homeless in the most recent figures, moved on as quickly as possible.

I move to Ms Hurley. As Deputy Rabbitte and Ms Hurley said, the statutory responsibility rests with local authorities and the root cause is shortage of housing supply. Local authorities need to be funded to supply social housing. I am not talking about HAP and so on; I am talking about the revenue side of it. The crucial side of this is the delivery of social housing through local authorities, voluntary housing associations and the voids scheme. Perhaps Ms Hurley can discuss voids. Fewer council houses were returned through the voids scheme in the past year. I am sure other public representatives also see vacant local authority houses in their areas which have been empty for long periods. I ask for a direct answer on that. It is a way to provide homes quickly to people on social housing lists. Ms Hurley provided the committee with a figure for the amounts spent this year. There was an Exchequer allocation of €146 million for homeless services. What about the use of the budget for construction? We are getting stories from local authorities that they are waiting for approval to move to the construction phases of council apartments and houses. That seems to be stuck. Is there an issue with releasing funding for local authorities to do their job, namely provide housing?

I refer to Traveller budgets. Consistently, those budgets have been underspent by some local authorities in particular. Hearings are taking place in the Seanad Chamber today on Traveller issues. I have been a member of the cross-party group and am aware that the spending of the allocations for Traveller accommodation is an issue that arises all the time. From my own experience, a lot of the larger families stuck in emergency accommodation, hotels and hubs are Traveller families. Some Traveller families are still quite large and I know Traveller families that have been in hotels for quite some time. I ask Ms Hurley to provide me with some answers on all of that.

**Ms Mary Hurley:** I might touch on the voids issue first and then deal with the delivery issue. Under Rebuilding Ireland, there is a blend of delivery modes. As the programme has rolled out, fewer void units were being counted in terms of delivery. This year, 303 void units will



be counted for the purposes of Rebuilding Ireland, but the Department is funding many more than that. We will issue approvals to local authorities over the coming days in relation to that. I agree completely with the Deputy that it makes absolute sense where one has a unit that can be brought back into stock very quickly for less than the cost of a build; it is a no-brainer. We are, therefore, working with local authorities on voids. We are also putting a planned maintenance programme in place. Work is under way with the County and City Management Association to ensure that the stock we have is maintained and that we do not get to a stage where a great deal more has to be done when someone leaves a property void. A two-pronged approach is being taken in that regard. For the purposes of Rebuilding Ireland, we will be counting so many. However, we will still fund local authorities to bring useful units back into use for families-----

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** On the planned maintenance, do the local authorities have to get that funding out of their own general outlay?

**Ms Mary Hurley:** We are working with them in respect of-----

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** There is not a specific fund.

**Ms Mary Hurley:** They get differential rent and they should be putting that back into maintaining their stock. We are also-----

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** Experience would suggest many of them are not really putting much money into planned maintenance.

**Ms Mary Hurley:** Some good collaborative work is being done by the local authorities and the Department in the context of putting a robust programme in place-----

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** I look forward to seeing that.

**Ms Mary Hurley:** -----and in terms of funding as well. We are all on the same page on that issue. Voids are a really useful way of housing families.

I might just go back to what was mentioned about exiting families from emergency accommodation and the timeframe involved. The service providers operating the hubs have service level agreements in place. The target is to have families out of hubs after six months. I have already spoken about the cases involving particular families where that may not be possible. The Peter McVerry Trust operates a number of our hubs and we know from it that six months is the average time in which people are moved on from those hubs. Respond, which also runs a number of hubs, has a timeframe for moving people on of between six and seven months. People are, therefore, moving on. It just takes time to set them up and in the meantime they need some care and support in family hubs. They are then ready to move on. We try to move people on as quickly as we can.

We talk about exits, homelessness and trying to move people on. To get a picture of the inputs and outputs and people moving through the system, let us look at Dublin for the first five months of this year. We had 899 families present in Dublin between January and May. Some 462 of them were prevented from entering emergency accommodation and 404 families exited emergency accommodation. There were 1,644 associated dependents. What we are seeing is that for every family which presents, another is prevented from moving into that situation. One family exits from emergency accommodation each month while another one enters. It is very much a moving system. The Deputy is absolutely right when she states that delivery is the way to go. We delivered significant supports, more than 27,000, to families last year, of which 8,422

were through build, acquisition and leasing. This year we will deliver 10,000 supports. That means there will be 10,000 sets of keys for families at the end of this year. We are ramping up delivery and we know that is the way to go in helping people to exit from homelessness.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** What about Traveller accommodation?

**Ms Mary Hurley:** I ask my colleague Mr. Kelly to speak on that issue.

**Mr. David Kelly:** The challenge with the Traveller accommodation budget has been in getting it fully spent. Every year, the Department seeks proposals from local authorities and then allocates funding to each authority. Spending has been disappointing. In 2018, spending was up 25% on the previous year to approximately €6 million but that was from an overall budget allocation of €12 million. There is a commitment in A Programme for a Partnership Government to analyse that situation. The Housing Agency commissioned a review to look at the delays in delivering Traveller-specific accommodation projects. On foot of that report, the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee, a statutory committee established under the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, advised the Minister that there was a need for some independent thinking in this area. An independent expert group was established by the Minister of State, Deputy English, in late 2018.

That expert group will submit a report to the Minister this month. It will examine the barriers to delivering Traveller accommodation and make recommendations on how we can address those barriers and improve the delivery of Traveller accommodation. It will look at the relevant legislation, including the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, and at the various policies. I know that planning was one of the issues considered. The Minister has committed to bringing forward relevant policy, including legislation, to give affect to the recommendations in the report. Hopefully, we will have some published responses in the Department in the autumn.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** Do I have time to pose one brief question to Mr. O’Donoghue?

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** Yes, one brief question.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** Mr. O’Donoghue mentioned children leaving State care and an associated programme. Will he give us some more information on that?

**Mr. Albert O’Donoghue:** When the inter-agency structures were originally put in place by colleagues in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government we realised, from our perspective, that there was an opportunity to expand the current capital acquisitions scheme to include a small cohort, in the region of 5% to 6% of caregivers annually, who might be at risk of homelessness. What the expansion provided by Ms Hurley, Mr. Kelly and their colleagues in the Department allows us to do is to draw down capital funding, with approved housing bodies, to provide accommodation for that particular cohort of young people. Those designated units will be for young people leaving State care.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** That is fine. It should be possible, therefore, to get some figures on that at a later stage. I know my time has run out.

**Mr. Albert O’Donoghue:** We can of course.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** Mr. Gibson wanted to interject briefly.

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** The comprehensive aftercare service has been highly successful. We have 50 properties with specific agencies that were purchased for young people leaving care.

We have good legislation, regulation and policy within Tusla. We also have good aftercare services across the country and we have commissioned non-governmental organisations to provide some services as well. The numbers for aftercare provision are exceptionally good. In many circumstances, young people remain with their foster carers in aftercare arrangements. We are also very proud that 64% of young people who leave care go on to higher education or good training programmes. That is a really good statistic for us. I just wanted the committee to be aware of some of those facts.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** Ms Hurley also wanted to comment.

**Ms Mary Hurley:** I have a quick comment. There was a query regarding approving and funding projects. Our budget this year is €2.4 billion for housing. To date this year, we have already provided €890 million for a range of housing activities and capital works across the country. That is supporting 322 projects with more than 5,600 homes in development. We also have 20,000 build units in the pipeline. The funding is, therefore, in place. The Deputy will be aware, because we have spoken about this matter previously, that there has been much discussion concerning the four-stage approval process. We have reviewed that process in the Department and we are working very closely with the local authorities to meet the timeframe for moving projects on as quickly as possible through the system. We are working well together with the local government system. Where issues arise we try to move them along as quickly as possible while always ensuring value for money.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** I am conscious that Deputy Mitchell is waiting. I call Mr. Quinlan.

**Mr. Cormac Quinlan:** I have a brief point on the comprehensive aftercare service. In May 2019, 24 care leavers had availed of that service - 15 through Focus Ireland, six through the Peter McVerry Trust and three through Don Bosco Care. I just wanted to provide that detail.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** I only have some brief questions because my colleagues have already covered much of the material. The report of the Ombudsman for Children stated that children were expressing feelings of sadness, confusion, anger and isolation. I think we all agree that is pretty tough on kids. What kind of monitoring is there of children's mental health in these hubs? Are any measures being taken to reduce stigma for homeless children?

**Mr. David Kelly:** The inter-agency group has been examining the recommendations made in the Ombudsman's report. It is a very important report, given the Department's reliance on hubs. I am concerned about some of the issues raised in terms of their impact on children. On the inter-agency group, one of the key aspects is ensuring we have linkages between homeless services and other services in the community. In Dublin, for example, where the majority of the hubs are located, the family action team ensures the children and families living in the hubs are linked with health services. If children need mental health supports, they will be linked with health services. The other issue we are examining is that of the supports provided in hubs. We continue to examine it closely with Tusla and the local authorities, in particular.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** On that point, we had representatives of Focus Ireland before the committee who stressed that there was a shortage of child support workers and a waiting list for families living in hubs to link with a child support worker. I want to know what is being done about that issue. The representatives could not speak enough about the need for therapeutic support services for children living in hubs. I want to know what has happened since. Is there a shortage of child support workers and, if so, what is being done about it? We have represen-

tatives of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs present. Is the Department willing to make extra funding available in the budget to ensure the children concerned receive the support they need, particularly therapeutic support services?

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** Perhaps I am reasonably placed to deal with the issue of child support workers. Tusla provided two family support worker posts for Focus Ireland, but, with reference to my earlier contribution to the discussion, I would like to engage with Focus Ireland to map across all communities in Ireland the support services that are actually available. We invest heavily in the community and voluntary sector under specific family support programmes and to provide counselling services. As I said, we have a comprehensive family support service in place across Ireland, at a community base level. It requires greater integration and collaboration from all organisations across social and health services. We need not run away with ourselves. We need an informed decision as to whether a raft of more family support workers are needed. I would be very happy to engage with Focus Ireland in that regard.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Has Tusla contacted Focus Ireland-----

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** We have a service level agreement with it. We are a key funder of it. We fund it to the sum of €3.5 million per annum. Therefore, it needs to conform with all elements of our agency as the child protection and welfare service. The majority of the funding is for aftercare services. We do engage with Focus Ireland. What I am saying is I would like to engage with it on services for homeless children. There is a substantial investment, not just by Tusla but also by the HSE and other State agencies, in services provided in lots of communities. There is a need for a co-ordinated, integrated response to help children who are homeless. A good example is a model we have developed at the Wellview Family Resource Centre. I believe the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has visited the programme put in place there and spoken highly about its involvement. It provides practical support and help, but it is also able to provide very specific services and signposts people affected by homelessness to a more therapeutic counselling service, as required.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Is Mr. Gibson happy that Tusla has sufficient funding to deal with this crisis?

**Mr. Jim Gibson:** We enter into an Estimates process with the Department every year and define our ask within it. Given the economic position and so on, we are very clear on our key priorities as the child protection and welfare service in Ireland and ask the Government for further investment. In the past three years there has been a significant investment. At times we are challenged in recruitment and were before the committee to discuss social work as a profession, but it is not just social work that makes up Tusla's staffing requirements.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** One of the main issues that came up throughout the hearings was the difficulties families with children faced during the summer. Therefore, I want to ask the bodies, while we have them all here together, what they have done to help families through these difficulties? The committee wrote to the Minister to ask that free Leap cards be made available to children not just during the summer period but also in October during the mid-term break in order to allow them to continue to participate in activities and travel to visit their friends to ensure they would not be isolated and feel alone. However, we have been banging our heads off a brick wall. Last week the Minister made an announcement that they would be available to every child for the month of July. Children who are homeless will not have free travel in August, October, December and so on. Will the Departments represented collectively knock their heads together and sort out this issue in order that we can make at least one small

thing available to the children in question?

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** That matter could be covered by the inter-agency which meets the bodies relatively regularly. Could it be an agenda item for one of the meetings?

**Mr. David Kelly:** The DRHE puts a lot of work into arranging activities for families during the summer. We could perhaps provide the committee with some details in that regard.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Mr. Kelly should do so because this issue was raised consistently by the groups that came before us. They stated there were no supports available to them. There are children and young teenagers sitting in hubs away from their friends who feel isolated. If this stuff is available, people need to know about it, instead of having everybody sitting around happy-clappy, saying they are doing A, B, C and D. If Mr. Kelly could share the information with us, I would welcome it as it is important.

**Mr. David Kelly:** I know from our discussions with the DHRE that it does make efforts to make recreational activities available to children during the summer, including various outreach events. We can provide a note for the committee on the matter.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Can Leap cards-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** What the Deputy is asking is whether there is anything happening to make free Leap cards available. I did not mean to prevent the delegates from answering the question.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** It is okay, Chairman.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** I was just trying to be helpful.

**Mr. David Kelly:** The Leap card initiative is for schoolgoing children. I think Transport for Ireland has offered free travel for children for the month of July. However, in the context of various resource demands, there has been no decision to extend Leap card funding.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** Can the matter be looked at?

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Can the delegates look at it?

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** How can something be placed on the agenda of the inter-agency group? This issue, obviously, concerns the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, but in a sense it is also multi-departmental issue.

**Mr. David Kelly:** It is funded from the homelessness budget, under section 10 of the Housing Act, on which there are quite a lot of demands, but it is something we could consider in the light of the funding available.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** Perhaps between the various Departments involved.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Mr. Kelly's response is disappointing because it is not the one the Minister gave us last week. He said he would look seriously at the matter. I think other Deputies will support me. It seems that the Departments and the Minister are giving different answers. I hope Mr. Kelly can address the matter.



**Mr. David Kelly:** I am not-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** It may be that the information has not filtered through to the various Departments involved.

**Mr. David Kelly:** I am certainly not contradicting the Minister and the Department if she is considering it. I am saying I am not in a position today to commit funding to it.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** I hope Mr. Kelly can raise the matter at the next meeting.

I am sorry for hogging the floor a little, but what is the longest time families have stayed in a hub or a hotel? The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government states it is six months, but I think there are Deputies here who know that there are people who stay for a lot longer than six months or a year. The Department states it is not possible to move these families. Would they admit that it is not possible to move these families because social housing is not being built for them to move into?

**Ms Mary Hurley:** The allocation of homes is very complex. There is a system of allocations, with people on waiting lists, and we are trying to move people out of homeless accommodation too. It is not as straightforward as simply building houses and moving people out of hotels. Deputy Mitchell is correct that in some circumstances, families have been in hotels for much longer than six months. It is up to two years in the case of some families. They may have a particular need or specialist requirement. We sometimes see reluctance among families in emergency accommodation to leave and move to the HAP scheme. A range of things is happening. Sometimes the family is very large, with multiple children, and it is hard to accommodate them. It is not straightforward. We work hard with the DRHE, the regional leads, and the housing authorities across the country to move people on as quickly as possible.

With regard to delivery, we all agree that supply is key and that is why we are ramping up and accelerating delivery. The funding is in place and we are trying to move as quickly as we can, which is why we are streamlining our processes. We also have to deliver quality homes for families. We all agree that we want to move families out of hotel accommodation as quickly as possible but the Deputy is correct that it is harder to move some families on in some circumstances. We want to move families to the right home with the right supports. In some circumstances, families are not in a position to move out of emergency accommodation because they still need the supports provided to them in that accommodation through the housing authority. The Department and local authorities are working hard to have families exit emergency accommodation. The numbers indicate that we prevent one in every two families from going into emergency accommodation. Unfortunately, some are still going into emergency accommodation. The Deputy raised some good points about the type of services that should be provided to families over the summer. We will get her a note about it. There are sports clubs and events organised for families throughout the summer.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I support Deputy Mitchell's remark. A presentation was given two weeks ago in Buswells. One of the requests related to families in emergency accommodation for the summer months. I came up with a suggestion which the witnesses might bring back to their steering group. More than 10,000 OPW sites across the country are owned by the Department of Finance. Why can we not give visitor cards to those families? They are educational, practical, embedded in our community and they could be free. Families could use them and it would be a day out. They are everywhere and we do not need to look for specific approval of it. It could be covered by the Department putting a card in place. That can happen

at the Department's request.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** I thank Deputy Rabbitte. I thank the witnesses for attending and giving presentations. We appreciate the information and the interaction.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.35 p.m. *sine die*.