

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM THITHÍOCHT, PLEANÁIL AGUS RIALTAS ÁITIÚIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, PLANNING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 14 Feabhra 2018

Wednesday, 14 February 2018

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Mick Barry,*	Senator Victor Boyhan,
Deputy Fergus O'Dowd,	Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor,
Deputy Eoin Ó Broin,	Senator Grace O'Sullivan.

* In the absence of Deputy Ruth Coppinger.

DEPUTY PAT CASEY IN THE CHAIR.

Business of Joint Committee

Vice Chairman: As we have a quorum, I call the meeting to order. We are now in public session. Apologies have been received from Deputies Bailey and Cowen. I propose that the committee goes into private session to deal with housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 9.35 a.m. and resumed in public session at 9.53 a.m.

Reports on Homelessness: Discussion

Vice Chairman: At the request of broadcasting and recording services, members and visitors in the Public Gallery are asked to ensure that, for the duration of the meeting, their mobile phones are turned off completely or switched to airplane, safe or flight mode, depending on their device. It is not sufficient to just put a phone on silent mode, as this will maintain a level of interference with the broadcasting system.

Today we are considering the reports, Finding a Home - Families' Journeys out of Homelessness, and Keeping a Home - Preventing Families from Becoming Homeless. On behalf of the committee I welcome, from Focus Ireland, Mr. Mike Allen and Ms Sarah Sheridan, and also Dr. Kathy Walsh, Mr. Brian Harvey and Mr. Seán Ó Siochrú who are independent research consultants of social issues.

Before we begin, I draw the witnesses attention 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 committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence in respect of a particular matter and they continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of that evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

The opening statements of today's meeting will be shared by Mr. Allen and the authors of the reports. I call on Mr. Allen to make his opening statement.

Mr. Mike Allen: I thank the Vice Chairman for the invitation from the committee to present these research reports. The main business is to hear from the researchers but I just want to make a couple of introductory remarks.

People will know Focus Ireland because of the work we do, namely, our services providing support to prevent homelessness or support people out of homelessness right across Ireland. Last year, we worked with more than 14,000 people, to prevent them from becoming homeless

or sort them out, or provide them with housing - we are one of the largest approved housing bodies in the country. Right from the beginning, Focus Ireland has argued that we need to understand homelessness better. We cannot just assume we know what it is and what works to solve it. We have an ambitious research programme in recent years which shines a light on our own services to learn what works but also gives wider information to help public and policy understanding of what types of interventions work to end homelessness. That is very much the context in which these reports were commissioned.

At one level, the reports reflect areas of work which Focus Ireland is very proud of and successful in. Last year alone, we supported more than 700 families who were in homeless services into secure housing. That is the highest ever, and is probably the largest single contribution of any organisation to that goal of moving people out of homelessness, and similar effectiveness in terms of the prevention work which will emerge in the two pieces of research.

The main conclusions we would draw the committee's attention to are as follows. First, prevention works. It is meaningful and important to prevent people from becoming homeless and we should be doing much more of that. The sort of prevention work which people may be more familiar with is the advice and information. What comes from this piece of work is the role of case management in preventative work. Really intense human-to-human interaction is important.

It is also important to look at the way in which these services and the research reports were funded. More than half of Focus Ireland's funding comes from State contracts, but it is important to see in these pieces of work the role of corporate sponsors and partners. Bord Gáis Energy funded the prevention programme that is being looked at here and part-funded its evaluation while in the area of exits from homelessness, the main funder of services is the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive but also, particularly in the area of the child support work, Tusla and the HSE.

In the area of supporting families out of homelessness, we are saying prevention works even when there is huge pressure on housing. It is also possible to move families and individual households out of homelessness even when there is insufficient affordable housing. Obviously, the ultimate answer to the problem we are facing involves a significant increase in the amount of affordable secure housing that is available to everybody but there is meaningful work we can be doing in the right policy context, even in the current context.

Those are the main points that we are drawing to the committee's attention. We also circulated our research strategy to the committee to show the broad range of research interests that we have and we would be happy to discuss that further with any Deputy or Senator who wishes to ask.

Mr. Seán Ó Siochrú: This particular work was done by Neil Haran and myself. Its defining feature is that it looks at those who were at risk of homelessness and managed to avoid it. The main reasons for that risk fall into two primary categories. The first is notice to quit, of which landlords selling property accounted for 40%. Family members moving in accounted for nearly half of all notices to quit. Then there were those who could not pay their rent, either because of arrears or rent increases. Some 14% of people had to move out because of direct rent increases. Overall, approximately 80% had experienced notices to quit or simply could not pay for where they were living, which does not come as a surprise but does say a lot.

A number of Focus Ireland's strategies worked and helped people to avoid homelessness.

First was building families' awareness of their rights and entitlements and providing clear directions to them. Understandably, most did not know what these were. Many had never experienced anything like this before. A second strategy was assisting families to navigate the State systems, which enabled them to access their rights and entitlements by going to meetings, advocating with the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, writing letters to State agencies, etc. A third strategy was coaching families on how to find properties. Many needed this help, particularly because they were in vulnerable situations dealing with agents and landlords and overcoming or getting around the latter's prejudices. A fourth strategy was supporting families to access financial assistance when they found somewhere. In particular, the housing assistance payment, HAP, was just coming into being and was a major factor for families, but many landlords did not want to engage with it at that point. A fifth strategy was bringing prevention services together in an integrated package and adding to them the Money Advice & Budgeting Service, MABS, counselling and other services that were available.

It was this combination of supports that worked, and we know that it worked because, between three and 15 months afterwards, 34 of the 35 families interviewed had succeeded in avoiding homelessness. They told us which supports had worked and how they had worked. That is our evidence. It is not just a question of what worked, but also how - the "how" of prevention - it worked when dealing with each family's complex circumstances.

Any family from any background, economic status, ethnicity or culture can be at risk of homelessness. When approaching services and others, prejudice can put families that are already under stress under even greater stress and reduce their resilience and motivation. Being non-judgmental does the opposite and builds their motivation. The case management approach is effective. Families need personalised, timely, flexible and hands-on support. They also require integrated and varied packages of support that are tailored to their needs.

Regarding short-term versus medium-term solutions, prevention services can only hope to achieve short-term solutions. We can see that with many people returning to homelessness after a period of being able to avoid it. While these solutions support families in crisis, they cannot address the structural causes. Alongside the evidence, the interviewees propose that long-term and medium-term solutions involve an effective implementation of HAP - they did not find it effective at that time, although matters have improved - improved regulation of the private rental sector and an increased supply of social housing. These are the interviewees' own views. They are quite well informed about what needs to be done after their experiences with Focus Ireland.

Vice Chairman: I thank Mr. Ó Siochrú.

Dr. Kathy Walsh: I will speak about our study, entitled Finding a Home, of families' journeys out of homelessness. It involved interviews with a cross-section of 25 families across the four Dublin local authority areas. I will cover three findings: what enabled people to exit homelessness; what inhibited people from exiting it; and what were the factors that helped people to sustain their tenancies. Mr. Harvey will present on the conclusions and recommendations.

We identified three exit enablers, the first of which was the availability of support, specifically information and case management support from Focus Ireland workers; support from child support workers where available; and support from family and friends. The second enabler was the capacity and tenacity of parents to engage with local authorities and private rental landlords. This linked to their time spent in homelessness. The longer they were in homelessness, the less able they appeared to be to engage with those different structures. The third

enabler was the particular family circumstances. Some families had certain reasons for trying to get out of emergency accommodation, for example, an unplanned pregnancy, someone was unwell or claustrophobia was an issue. These were drivers.

Of the inhibitors from exiting homelessness, the first was the high stress levels and negative emotions linked to living in emergency accommodation. The consequences include relationship breakdown, addiction, behavioural problems in children and poor performance in school. The second was the lack of suitable affordable accommodation in general and in preferred areas of Dublin, specifically near family supports and schools. The third was the lack of case management and child support work. Families often had to wait a long time before being allocated a key worker. The fourth was the practical difficulties associated with finding the necessary child care to enable parents to attend accommodation viewings and secure accommodation.

In contrast, the five factors that helped sustain new tenancies were: affordable rent, ideally deducted at source, with a sense of security for families lucky enough to have been allocated local authority or approved housing body, AHB, accommodation, which was a game changer; the quality, suitability and location of accommodation where it was close to families, friends and schools that made life much easier; the availability of the exceptional needs payment from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, which was a considerable support in fitting out accommodation and enabling families to avoid falling into unnecessary debt; where families had previous experience of living independently, matters moved more quickly, but where families had not lived independently previously, it was a significant challenge; and the shorter the length of time a family spent in homelessness, the quicker the parents and the children were able to adjust to independent living.

Mr. Brian Harvey: Our first finding was that panic and high stress levels were families' first issue on becoming homeless, followed by a long period of less intense but accumulating stress with boredom and poor conditions. School was a key stress point. Many families lose all their possessions at the point of homelessness. While we need long-term solutions to family homelessness, alleviating stress while homeless is equally important.

Families strongly favoured local authority accommodation because of its security, affordability, standard and location in communities that they knew. They liked AHBs. The HAP system was affordable, but not secure. They did not favour private renting because of its insecurity, high rents and bad conditions.

A key finding was that the construction programme must be weighted heavily in favour of local authority accommodation. We must accentuate good practices that enable exits from homelessness and address bad practices that inhibit them. Many of these are low-cost changes to procedures. In terms of prevention, we must change the system. When people first approach local authorities to say that they are about to be made homeless, the authorities tell them to return after they have actually become homeless. That is not a preventative practice.

There must be an end to the practice of self-accommodation. It is not in accordance with the law, does not work and causes extreme stress. There must be an end to substandard and overcrowded emergency accommodation where there is a lack of cooking facilities and play areas for children, some of which we have encountered. There must be an end to the daily practice of signing in in person or by phone, to be replaced by an electronic or text system, given that this is another significant stress point. There must be an end to the practice of removing families from the housing waiting list without their knowledge or consent, as it means that they return to the bottom of the list, sometimes after spending many years on it. Systems of scanning, quality

control and independent appeals must be applied. There must be an end to local authorities' "two strikes and out" policy, to be replaced by a test of what is a reasonable offer or refusal and an independent appeals system.

When homeless people finally move into accommodation, it is important that it be furnished and floored. Many places people moved to had no floors, so they had to handle that themselves. There must be improved treatment of homeless people in some of the local authority offices where it is poor currently, with dialogue between local authorities and homeless people and training for local authority staff. There must be some kind of depot or place where people who have become homeless can leave their possessions and reclaim them afterwards.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank Focus Ireland and the researchers. These are two really important reports, which is one of the reasons we agreed to bring the witnesses before the committee today to discuss them. It is not just important to give the witnesses the opportunity to put them on the record, but that after this meeting the committee would write to the Minister specifically requesting him to respond to the recommendations that have been set out in the report because we would like to hear what he has to say. It is very nice to be having an evidence-based discussion on family homelessness, unlike in one of our previous sessions and it is incumbent on us that we listen to the evidence in that respect.

I wish to make a couple of points, primarily to pick up on some of the points Mr. Harvey's made at the end. One of the things that has happened since the research has been done is that some local authorities have now changed their procedures for what happens when a family presents before the notice-to-quit period expires. For example, in South Dublin County Council it now gives families access to homeless HAP rates of payment, probably about two months out from the notice-to-quit date. It would be better if it did it from an earlier period but that is clearly something that should be standardised across all local authorities because it would give people another tool.

The recommendation on self-accommodation is one of the most important elements in the report, given the additional stress it adds to families. I do not mean just in terms of financing if one is low on credit but the huge efforts people have to go to.

It is important to state that last year South Dublin County Council made a change to how it treats housing assistance payment, HAP, tenants, partly because it realised, rightly, that families in emergency accommodation who had been on the housing list for a long term had a disincentive to go into HAP accommodation. What South Dublin County Council has now done is ensured that while one is still put on a HAP transfer list, one still has access to choice-based letting on the same terms as one had prior to opting for HAP. Essentially, it means that while one is not counted in the top line housing list figures one has access to the primary housing list exactly as one would have done previously, which is a very significant change. Again, we have raised it with the Minister to say that should be rolled out across all local authorities because, essentially, it means that one's access to council housing and the period of time one waits does not change by going into HAP. It creates a problem in terms of counting the figures but we can just add the HAP figures to the housing list figures and get over that.

On two strikes and out, where a local authority is using choice-based letting for the majority of its lettings then nobody gets an offer and therefore nobody has to refuse it because one applies for it. Obviously it is different with emergency accommodation. I strongly support the recommendation that has been made. There must be some other way of introducing not an element of choice, because that makes it sound like people are choosing properties willy-nilly,

but something that gives the applicant or the family in emergency accommodation some degree of decision-making over it. I have dealt with offers where, for example, families in emergency accommodation who have children with severe special needs were being offered accommodation directly in front of a canal. When I say directly, I mean outside the gate of the house with no barrier. In that case there was a severely autistic 18-year old young man. On the basis of the information alone one can see how it is inappropriate. In that particular instance it took us some months of fighting with the local authority to withdraw the offer but one should not have to fight in that way. The independent appeals process is important.

Have the witnesses had any response from the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, the Minister or the Department on the recommendations? The report is important but unless we get a response from them it will not make a difference. I am interested to hear about that. I was at the launch of the report. I genuinely support the recommendations which tally not only with the research but the experience of many of us who are working with lots of families who are presenting as homeless in emergency accommodation. It confirms what we already know, anecdotally, in the constituency office.

Mr. Mike Allen: We have not had a formal response from either the Department or the Dublin Region Homeless Executive. We would welcome if the committee were to ask for a formal response. On a day-to-day basis our services would be talking about those issues with the Dublin Region Homeless Executive and elsewhere. A formal response from that quarter is probably less appropriate.

The self-accommodation issue continues to be an enormous problem. To be clear, what is involved in that is once a family has been assessed as homeless under the legislation by the local authority, the local authority believes that it fulfils its statutory obligation by saying “Go and find yourself somewhere to stay tonight and we will pay for it.” We share the view expressed by Mr. Harvey that it is not a correct interpretation of the intention of the Oireachtas when it passed that legislation or of the people when they changed the Constitution to protect the rights of children. It is hard to get the number but there are more than 250 families who are still self-accommodating so the concentration in Rebuilding Ireland is whether they are in commercial hotels or in hubs and that is where all this debate has been, but we believe what is equally important is the question of the big difference between being in a commercial hotel and knowing one will be there for six months, and being in a commercial hotel and going to be out tomorrow night and having to look for another place.

There are more than 250 families who have no case manager working with them and they may be waiting for several months. They complained strongly in the course of the research that they were waiting for a case manager. There have been several occasions when the homeless executive has funded an additional cohort of case managers in Focus Ireland and we very much welcome and appreciate that expenditure. The case management ratio is about 20 families to one case worker who is skilled and has a degree in social care and other areas. What has happened is that every time an additional cohort of case managers has been recruited the total number of homeless families has gone up and therefore recreated a waiting list.

The waiting list for children is even greater. When a family becomes homeless its needs are assessed when it gets a case manager but our trained staff also assess whether there are particular needs for the children, not just a problem arising from the fact that the family is homeless, which is a problem in itself. We have a number of child support workers funded by the HSE and Tusla but there is a waiting list for that. In a situation of a family being homeless where it does not have a case manager and it has been assessed as having additional needs for a child there

is a waiting list. The overall problem of homelessness is so large that people are beginning to have to stand back from it but within the reports certain key things have been identified which could make a substantial difference to the experience of families and children who are homeless and the likelihood of them moving out. We know from our own work that a family which has a case manager is four times more likely to move out of homelessness than a family which is left to its own devices. From every point of view it makes sense to invest in an adequate number of case managers.

Senator Victor Boyhan: First, I thank the witnesses from Focus Ireland for coming in. Even the name is indicative of the exceptionally good job it does. Everything Deputy Ó Broin said is spot on. He has hit the nail on the head. What struck me is all the recurring themes. I served on a council for more than 20 years so none of this is new to me.

What is really scary is that only two weeks ago I had someone in here who was homeless in another county, not where I was involved, and we made representations to Tusla, the Minister and the local authority and we are still waiting for a response. I refer to a crisis situation. I am a Member of the Oireachtas and that is the experience I receive as a public representative. When one rings up local authorities on a regular basis, which I do, the response I get is that the people whom I represent are not homeless yet. In one case there was an 80-year old woman living in Dundrum who was being put out of her home. The local authority said it needed evidence. I said the woman is vulnerable, she is 80 years of age. She is in a three-bedroom house that is falling down. I agreed that it was beyond her needs and capacity but she needs something else. I was asked whether she was on the homeless list because if not, the local authority was not really interested in talking to her. I asked if the woman could meet somebody to talk to them but there was no interest in that.

Everything the witnesses said is clear. I thank them for the evidence based on the personal journeys and experiences they have shared with us through the research. That makes the result even more profound. I agree with what was said about taking a non-judgmental approach. It is about dignity and respect for people in those situations. That is not the experience of people dealing with local authorities. I want to hone in on local authorities because they are the housing authorities. People are being told to self-refer and get out on the road and get their own place. I live in south County Dublin, where property is very expensive and it is not possible to rent accommodation, even for many who are employed. I am glad this report is evidence-based. There is a need for standard practice across all local authority areas because there is an inconsistency in personnel, staff and approach. I agree about the need for case managers to be personal advocates, mentors or supporters. Housing is complex and there are many reasons why people are homeless besides affordability. It needs a case response, a bigger plan, particularly because many children and vulnerable people with mental health problems and a whole range of issues are affected.

The witnesses say some local authority practices have been identified as the cause of significant stress to homeless families. We have talked about some of them here. Can they share some of that with us? Deputy Ó Broin made the point that there are strong recommendations here and I do not think anyone on this committee would doubt that we should be pursuing them. We should bring the Minister back in, get an official response and get timelines for rolling it out. What are the witnesses recommending in terms of an overall charter of rights for people who are homeless?

Families favour local authority accommodation over other accommodation. Why cannot HAP, or some other model, provide the same assurances in respect of affordability, security and

choice? HAP is everywhere and there is not enough social housing. Location is a priority and Mr. Harvey stated “Families very much favoured local authority accommodation because of its security, affordability, standard and location.” People have said that to me too. I can see why it is the case. The gap between HAP and affordability and security and so on is a challenge for all of us. It strikes me that we need a charter of rights and standard practice across all local authority areas for dealing with people who present as homeless.

Mr. Brian Harvey: On HAP, homeless people told us that although it was affordable, it was not their home. They could be put out again quite quickly. They could not do anything to that home. If they were in a local authority home, in most cases having a good relationship with local authorities when they were tenants, they felt they could reasonably call it their home. Legally, they had no long-term rights to be in HAP accommodation. Generally a person in a local authority home will not be put out unless they are responsible for gravely serious anti-social behaviour. There is a strong sense of security in local authority accommodation which is not the case in the HAP system.

In respect of the local authority practices, the problem is that the local authorities tend to contest that these problems happen. There is no point of dialogue between homeless people or organisations working with the homeless and the local authorities to address, name and sort out these issues. We know of some homeless people who complained about the way they were treated and those complaints went nowhere. Many of these people were in a state of fear about the local authorities. We have recorded the processes here such as “come back when you are really homeless”; “go and self-accommodate yourself”; “sign in daily”. In one extreme case, a woman in emergency accommodation was going into town every day from the airport, with two children in a buggy, to sign in in person and meet three members of staff: a garda, a person who then signed her in and a case worker. Each of them went through her file, even though it had not changed since the previous day. Then she walked back out to the airport and had to do the same thing again the next day. Others had a car and were driving from distant parts of the city to sign in in person. This causes intense stress to homeless people. We recorded instances of homeless people breaking down in tears in offices and of children wetting themselves. One more sympathetic staff member said “I’m tired of you breaking down in tears in my office, go home, don’t come back to me again. You can sign in by phone instead.” We do have mobile phones and text messaging so why are those systems not used? There is also a practice of taking homeless people off the housing list when they do not know about it. The local authority says it tried to contact the people but these people genuinely have no knowledge of such contact ever having happened. They took the view that if the Revenue Commissioners or the social welfare office were looking for them they would have found them.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin took the Chair.

Mr. Brian Harvey: The two strikes and out policy is also a problem. It might seem that if a person turns down a first offer they should take the second one. The problem is that the first offer is often not in a place that the person applied for. I can think of a father in one case and a mother in another who said they could not bring their children there because the place was in very bad condition and, more important, it was surrounded by drug pushers, people shooting up and needles. They said they would not attempt to rear their children in those conditions. That is why they said no and took the risk of a second offer. The second offer is normally a lot better. There is a sense among some homeless people that a really bad first offer is being cynically offered so that they will feel under much greater pressure to accept the second offer.

Private accommodation should be furnished but often is not. Local authority accommoda-

tion should be furnished but not only is it not furnished but it is often not floored either. The people then have to find money from their own resources, if they still have it, or go to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, which generally does provide it. The way in which that is done was one of the strong good points in the report.

The poor treatment in local authority offices needs to be recognised and accepted, not denied. We have suggested dialogue but while local authorities by definition have authority, it strikes me that there is scope for the Minister to issue guidelines to them as to what is a reasonable standard of behaviour and to say there should be an independent appeals system and scanning of the removal of people from the local authority list. Instructions, guidelines or a *desiderata* of what they should do could issue from the Minister. That should be treated seriously by the local authorities but it would also mean that the advocates and the Focus Ireland case workers could go to local authorities and say that what they are doing is not in line with what the Minister has said should be the normal practice. Yes, there could be a charter of rights provided there is a mechanism to implement it, complain and work through it but the Minister should also say that the standard in respect of the points we have highlighted here in local authorities should be much better.

Mr. Seán Ó Siochrú: Providing a non-judgmental, personal and supportive approach is not just a matter of respecting human beings and human rights and so on. In our examination of how people avoided becoming homeless they found the single most important thing they got from Focus Ireland was being treated properly. That built their confidence. They realised it was not their fault and it motivated them to persist, work and pursue this. That was the single major factor that enabled them to avoid homelessness. It is important and it is a practical point because otherwise motivation is lost, people become depressed and are unable to act to solve their own problems. Then they find themselves victimised even more because they are accused of being unable to solve their own problems. It helps to avoid homelessness, as well as to deal with being homeless. Some kind of training and capacity building for local authority and other staff would have to be added to guidelines.

Mr. Mike Allen: The reservations that families have about HAP - I am sure this is true for individuals too - are based on objective facts, which are a result of specific public policies. Therefore, the way to deal with their reservations is not to put more pressure on them to take offers they do not want to take but to change the public policies which make that form of housing insecure. The big answer is more social housing, but there are smaller answers immediately available. The first, as Deputy Ó Broin has mentioned, is the policy used in south County Dublin to integrate the HAP transfer list with the housing list. This would make a huge difference to the reality of people accepting HAP offers. If one has been on the housing list for ten years and takes a HAP offer and knows that is it and that one is now back to the bottom of the housing list, it is a huge disincentive. There is absolutely no reason why what was introduced in south Dublin could not be introduced everywhere else and made policy rather than just an individual positive measure.

The second answer concerns security. People, if they move into private rented accommodation, get a Part 4 tenancy for six years but they know that if the landlord is going to sell up or renovate the property, he can terminate the tenancy at any point. Again, as Focus Ireland has argued, these loopholes which allow landlords to evict tenants at will when they want to sell up, or say they want to sell up, should be removed for all private sector combination buy-to-lets. This would make HAP more attractive.

Someone on a HAP tenancy pays the differential rent but when the rent goes up, as it is al-

lowed to by 4%, very often the amount that the local authority will pay under HAP does not go up. There is very little discussion of this. There seems to be no policy to ensure that that follows. The State says the landlord can put up the rent by 4% but takes no responsibility to pay that, so people in HAP premises are finding themselves paying the differential rent and making up a gap between the rent and the actual amount being paid. Under rent supplement this was illegal. It was widespread but at least it was acknowledged publicly as wrong and illegal. Under HAP, it appears to be treated as if it is perfectly okay. This drives people into much deeper poverty and below their minimum threshold of income and makes HAP less attractive because they know they will be squeezed. That is the issue with HAP.

Regarding what has been said about the local authorities, the stories the families tell need to be listened to. As Mr. Harvey correctly says, local authority staff have a different perspective. Most local authority staff are courteous and hard-working, and we recognise the huge pressure they are under, but the absence of guidelines and training for front-line staff in dealing with these hugely pressured situations is sadly missing.

Finally, if the public discourse about homelessness presents people who are homeless as gamblers and scammers who are essentially trying to cheat the system, the front-line staff inevitably respond by trying to catch them out. If the relationship between a public servant and a citizen needing support is one in which the public servant feels he or she is being cheated, if that is the public discourse, it is very hard to make that a supportive and human relationship. This is why we so strongly reacted to the comments of the chair of the Housing Agency and why we do not think he is suitable to hold that post.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I agree with previous speakers. I have had dealings with the local authorities and some of the staff of Focus Ireland, who have been doing an excellent job but the problem is that the system is wrong. Mr. Allen brought up HAP, for example. I will give the committee two recent examples of my representations in this regard. One took place on Monday, the other on Friday, when I met a lady who was in arrears and whose son had moved back into the family house. Her rent had doubled and, because she had not cleared the associated arrears, her HAP payment was cut from the end of December. We are now into February and she is still paying off whatever the sum is weekly to HAP. Unless she clears her arrears, which she has 12 weeks to do, those administering HAP will not put her back on the system. She is therefore getting no HAP and is also clearing her rent arrears. It just does not make sense. I said to those administering HAP that there must be an appeals process in place to give her that extra little time. They refused. HAP will only allow a tenant 12 weeks to clear his or her arrears. If he or she does not do so within 12 weeks, they do not want to know and they cut the tenant off.

Another experience I had was through working through the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. These are people who come to my clinics on foot of a referral from the society and have just become homeless. There is no help out there for them. It is the system that is wrong. I met a lady who, through no fault of her own - I know the family well - handed back her house eight years ago to the local authority. I will correct Mr. Harvey on local authorities. The reason she left was anti-social behaviour, of which she was a victim. There was nothing the local authority could do for her. Tenants who do not pay their rent to the local authorities are evicted. A local authority tenant is not evicted, however, if he or she causes anti-social behaviour - there is no such legislation - yet tenants who do not pay their rent to the local authorities will be brought to court by them for the rent. This seems to be the way in which HAP is administered too. It is all about arrears. The lady to whom I refer is off the housing list. Naturally, when one hands back

a key, one is off it for five years. This was agreed, and there was no problem. She had been off the list for five years - she has been off it for eight years now - and had a small amount of arrears of €800. She qualified to go back on the housing list, but until she clears her €800 arrears, those administering HAP will not put her back on the payment. Therefore, she is now paying out €1,000 a month on rent and does not qualify to go on HAP because she has arrears of a few hundred euro. I suggested that she would pay it in instalments but they did not want to know.

It is the system that is wrong. I see this with Focus Ireland. I know it is going around working with people, but what can it do if the system cannot be beaten? We were talking about rent recently. Rent increases have become humongous. I see this in Carlow, my area, where rent has increased from €700 a month to €1,000 a month. Then one fights with those administering HAP to get the extra increase. In fairness, if a tenant has a good case, they will give him or her the extra bit but there is no wider help there. The rent pressure zones are not working, as the witnesses know from the report. The landlords are increasing the rent and the people cannot afford to come up with it. We now have soup kitchens. In my constituency we have set up what we would know as a soup kitchen. This is the era we are living in. It does not make sense.

What do we do? I know Focus Ireland's role is to speak to those involved but what can all of us do? We need to give those affected information and tell them their entitlements but this can only happen if the system is changed and everyone works together. I have noticed lately that if I make representations about a case in which I know the person will become homeless again, it is the same situation: I am told to come back when they are homeless. Then the person rings Focus Ireland, which, by the way, does a great job. I am not giving out about it. However, what do we do? I had representatives of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in with me again the other day to try to help the woman to whom I referred earlier to clear her arrears. As those administering HAP will not look at the case, what role are we all going to play? The biggest issue facing us is lack of housing, including apartments. Unless the system is changed, the suggested solutions will not work. Focus Ireland plays a very positive role. We seem to be knocking the county councils here. As Mr. Allen said, county councils are going with what they are told to do. They are implementing legislation. That is what I was told yesterday and that is fine.

Does Focus Ireland buy houses? When it meets a family that is homeless - and it is great that it does so - and sits down with them and helps them with awareness of their rights and entitlements, does it follow up on this through the local authorities? I know the local authorities ring Focus Ireland and tell its staff when they have cases of people who are ready to become homeless. What exactly is Focus Ireland's role in this regard? Does Focus Ireland follow up on this? Does it go back and work with the local authority? Does it go back to the family? Does it keep in contact with the families until they are sorted? I could outline to the witnesses five or six cases I know of that need help from Focus Ireland. I acknowledge it helps such cases and does a great job but unless it looks at the system, it will not work. Focus Ireland's biggest problem is HAP. HAP is only what is called rent allowance, and I think that is people's confusion. That is exactly what it is; it is no different. One gets one's form, fills it in and stays on the housing list. One can stay on the housing list while on HAP. One only comes off the housing list through RAS, and there is massive confusion over RAS and HAP.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eoin Ó Broin): I ask the Senator to bring her questioning to a close.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Do the witnesses not see when it is dealing with these cases that unless the system is changed it will not work? That is the problem.

I say to the witnesses well done. They are doing a great job with what they can do, in fairness.

Mr. Mike Allen: I could not agree with the Senator more. We are here because the system, as she describes it, is defined by legislation and the members are the people who write the legislation. We are not the ones who will change the system; the members are. I urge them to get on with it.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: That is the problem. How many times have I brought this up with the Minister?

Mr. Mike Allen: We know there are people trying to change the system. Our role in that is to provide evidence and to bring the voices of the people experiencing the problems, which members, as Deputies and Senators, hear anyway, in a particular and structured way to the committee and to bring solutions. However, we are entirely in members' hands in respect of amending the legislation and implementing statutory instruments and regulations.

As regards the Senator's question about how our services work, it depends on the nature of the service. If someone contacts the services about which Mr. Ó Siochrú wrote, the case manager will stay with him or her right the way through until the problem is sorted out. We have a six-month follow-up after we disengage with the family or individual and think the problem has been solved. Ms Sheridan's team telephones them six months later and asks whether it has worked out. Ours is the only organisation in Europe that uses a six-month follow-up to see where people are after we think they are okay.

Deputy Mick Barry: These are two valuable reports and the recommendations contained within them are good. There is not one I would fail to support. A few themes shine through from what has been written and said. The success of the Focus Ireland policy of appointing case managers is striking, as they deal with people on a one to one basis, are non-judgmental and understand the nuances and individual circumstances of each person facing or in homelessness while providing assistance. Being in someone's corner makes a huge difference, as evidenced by the fact that there was a result in 34 out of 35 cases, which is positive.

Another theme that emerges strongly is the position in which the system puts people when they become homeless. Is there anything more stressful in people's lives than facing homelessness? Perhaps divorce or the death of a spouse, while some surveys have shown that going to war is up there, but it is one of the three or four most stressful life events a human could face, yet the system says people have to provide their own accommodation and sign in on a daily basis when there are clear alternatives such as texting. An issue that is constantly raised with me but which has not been mentioned in this discussion is the lack of storage facilities in which people can store their worldly goods. The provision of such facilities is recommended in the report. This is perhaps the most stressful situation someone will face, yet the system forces him or her to jump through a series of petty and humiliating hoops as though they are being punished for the crime of being homeless. This highlighted in the report which calls for a complete reversal of culture, which is entirely what is needed.

I read with interest the survey of the primary reasons people face homelessness. It is overwhelmingly down to issues in the private rented sector such as notice to quit to allow the sale of property. Mr. Harvey has mentioned that rent arrears and rent increases account for approximately 80% of cases. The interviewees picked three issues that need to be addressed, one of which was regulation of the private rented sector. Clearly, that is an issue to be addressed

in this discussion. I was a wee bit surprised that none of the 35 cases that were managed referred to notice to quit on the grounds of substantial refurbishment or renovation because my experience is that the number of so-called renovictions is on the increase. It is the excuse *du jour* for landlords who are moving away from the sale of property to substantial refurbishment when issuing notices to quit. Will the delegates comment on this? For example, I am dealing with a case in Cork city which involves a block of apartments, Leaside Apartments, which was purchased last year by a vulture fund. The prospectus issued by Sherry Fitzgerald when it was being sold referred to the opportunity to refurbish and significantly increase rents to yield more than €1 million a year from the building. A fresh batch of notices to quit have just been issued because the fund did not do its homework in the first batch. More than 25 households face homelessness, many of which are families with young children. The residents have written to the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade who is a local representative asking for a face to face meeting. They will ask for the loophole in the law in that regard to be closed entirely and for a ban on economic evictions or, at the very least, a moratorium. I support the imposition of a full ban in that regard. Will Mr. Allen comment on the phenomenon of the rise the number of of renovictions? Is it on Focus Ireland's radar?

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I welcome the delegates. I agree with almost everything that has been said. I am a public representative for 43 years and have long experience of working on housing issues which have always been on my doorstep. I agree, in particular, with the points made about how local authorities deal with applicants when they first present. I have always objected to the hatch or counter mentality, particularly where individuals have to discuss personal matters with a queue of people behind them. That is absolutely unacceptable. Local authority officials should be instructed to automatically direct people who say they wish to discuss a private or housing matter to a private interview room or a comfortable space in which nobody else can hear what is being discussed. If that costs money, let it cost money and if councils have to rent other accommodation, that should be done. Respect for the individual should have primacy. I commend those in County Louth who work on housing issues, as they do a fantastic job, but when they do not have the facilities or provide the privacy the client needs, that is unacceptable.

Mr. Allen raised the issue of being an advocate for the client. Many families are able to make a good case, but others are not. They may have difficulties in communicating because of their educational background or they may not be used to dealing with officialdom and are intimidated by the process. An advocacy service is important to allow an advocate to accompany the client to the interview and present the case on his or her behalf. Attending the interview should be a professional service that is provided. People who are homeless or in acute housing difficulty may not know what the best case scenario is for them. Sometimes when talking to affected constituents, they mention casually that there is a serious medical problem in the family arising from caring for a child with a disability or someone being treated for cancer and so on. Being able to articulate the best case for them is hugely important. We do it as elected representatives by listening and speaking to them. Quite often people do not put their best case forward and this is the other role of the advocate or council official. This is where the training issue comes in. There should be a national training course and a national standard that everybody must meet. Universally applied protocols must be in place and it should not be acceptable if they are not applied.

The advocacy bodies for housing are very strong and I welcome them. In many ways I do not suggest they should be the invigilators of the standard, but we need an independent look at

how people are treated and dealt with by local authorities. This should be somebody outside the local government box. I would not have a problem if it was carried out collectively. It would be a professional service by an outside agency and it could be supported in providing it. We would have the same standards everywhere, we would have qualified people trained to listen and the best case would be put forward for people.

I am quite sure other members and the witnesses also come across people who had been on the housing list for eight years, then left an address but did not tell the local authority where they went and now find themselves cut off the housing list. If these people can prove they have been living in the community I do not have a problem with sustaining continuation of their housing timeline. If they leave the jurisdiction that is a different matter. This is a serious problem I come across it and it needs to be dealt with.

My next problem is on the housing assistance payment, HAP. My experience of it in Louth is completely the opposite to what we have heard, but that is the personal nature of the service. More than 2,000 people are in receipt of the HAP in Louth and it is a professional and focused top-class service. I cannot praise it enough. If and when I am in contact with the HAP service about a family the staff are fully versed with that family's needs. They are really on top of their game. I am sorry this is not happening in every area but I have no doubt it ought to be.

The issue of being non-judgmental has been mentioned. It does not matter who people are or what their background is, whatever it is no judgment should be made on them. This is critically important. Sometimes this is the case. People *in extremis* who are homeless might ring me at 5 p.m. telling me the office is closed and asking what they will do, and I will phone the officer. They are in a dreadful situation. When people go looking for accommodation even with the HAP, if they are poor or unemployed they may feel inadequate because they are not dressed properly or they cannot speak with the same accent as other people because of where they come from. They feel absolutely discriminated against. I have discussed this with a housing body nationally and it funds applicants going for an interview for accommodation by giving them money. It is not a begging process, but if it feels it can help it will give the person a couple of hundred euro to buy a shirt and tie or a suit so that person presents as well as anybody else.

When landlords are deciding between applicants obviously they are subjective and perhaps they do not like somebody and one does not know why. The council could be the advocate whereby the HAP officer views a property for rent and asks to take it. I do not know whether this makes sense, but the council could be an agent that fills the property with its clients. In other words, the landlord would effectively let to the local authority. I know this is not a strictly legal case. This would take away discrimination by landlords who can and do discriminate against families who come from poor backgrounds. I do not have to spell it out. These are the types of changes that are needed.

I agree with the main point that has been made on evictions. I have heard about many of them. The number of people who come to me with their notice to get out has increased exponentially in the past year. I challenge the person and I ask to see the letter. I then telephone the landlord involved to see whether he or she does have a sister living in England. In many cases what the landlords say is not true, but they use it to get the person out.

This has been a very helpful debate and I thank the witnesses. I thank the Acting Chairman for allowing me to speak. This is positive determined collective progress that will articulate the change needed in officialdom and in how people are approached. Above all there should be respect for everybody and the words I want to hear are support, help, advocacy and empathy.

We know when somebody who comes to us is not getting this. We know when they are angry and when nobody is listening to them. We need a sea change, and I recommend the Louth staff with whom I deal. We must have best practice, and nothing less than that will do or will be acceptable. The louder the witnesses shout at us the more we must get on with fixing the problem and ensure people are respected and treated fairly and properly.

Mr. Seán Ó Siochrú: I will respond to the questions that relate directly to our research. One was on advocacy and having an advocate to put the case. We asked all of the families whether they feel more confident now and whether, if they were confronted by this again, they could handle it themselves and manage it. Not all, but almost all, said they could, but they would want and need an advocate with them. They stated they understand their rights much better but they are not confident they could meet the Residential Tenancies Board or the agencies involved. The day that people feel they do not need an advocate with them when going to these offices, and feel they will be fairly treated and will be able to respond in a comfortable manner is the day we should all look forward to.

On the issue of renovictions, in a way the Deputy answered the question himself. The people we were looking at had avoided homelessness and their experience came from 18 months to nine months ago. At that period, the situations mostly involved landlords with one or two properties who were going the simple route and thought they would get away with it. Committee members might be amazed by how many of them got the letters wrong and, of course, they were spotted immediately. Support in this regard gave tenants another three months to stay in their housing. If anybody is playing the system now it is landlords, because we are seeing far more corporate vulture funds and corporate landlords. The professionalisation of the landlord system is going in the wrong direction. It is going corporate professional and vulture fund professional. They are the ones playing the system and this is the effect we are seeing.

Mr. Brian Harvey: I will reply to the question raised by Deputy Barry on why people are becoming homeless. A year ago, my colleague, Dr. Cathy Walsh, and I did a study for the Housing Agency on why families were becoming homeless. The question has a certain artificiality for many homeless people. In some cases landlords said they wanted to increase the rent and they knew the tenants could not afford it. In other cases they stated they needed the property for a relative or that they wanted to renovate the property. The point is the tenants do not know. In some renovation cases the tenants have said they went past the house and it was not being renovated. In these cases even though renovation may be the stated reason a rent increase and a desire to get in a higher paying tenant may actually be the reason.

The reason tenants feel so powerless in this situation is a critical one that is not often mentioned. The most important thing a leaving tenant needs from a former landlord is a letter of reference. If tenants argue they will not get a letter of reference. Arguing about why they are being put out is not something tenants want to do because a letter of reference for their next potential landlord is absolutely the most precious thing they can get.

Mr. Mike Allen: Most of the questions have been answered. Under the current system, when a person becomes homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, he or she will contact the local authority setting out the reasons this has occurred. I am not aware of any local authority that has a system for checking this information. There is an obvious feedback system which would enable local authorities to become part of policing this. When people inform the local authority that they have received a notice of termination because their accommodation is being put up for sale, the local authorities should automatically verify whether this is true. Currently, if anyone wishes to contest the reasons given by the landlord, he or she can go to the Residential

Tenancies Board.

The State must police its own laws. While we recognise that successive Governmen

ts have recently introduced a number of additional rights for private rental tenants, for instance, the rent control systems and additional requirements on people choosing to sell up, it has not done anything to police these rights. We hear people make the case that rent control is not working. A system that pushes against the market, is not policed and does not have penalties will not work.

Landlords have an major economic interest in doing exactly what the previous speaker described. If we are to prevent them from doing this, we need not only legislation but systems for checking up on what is being done. I find it incredible that local authorities put so many questions to families and spend public money on hotel rooms, family hubs and so forth, yet they do not have a system for checking whether an eviction is being carried out for the reasons given. They should do this as a means of protecting public funds.

Senator Grace O’Sullivan: This is one of the most fruitful and beneficial meetings of the joint committee that I have attended. It is very useful to have an evidence based report and I note also that we are already discussing what we, as legislators, can do to advance some of the issues under discussion.

Does Focus Ireland intend carrying out an analysis in other counties? Can the findings of the report be extrapolated nationwide or are there likely to be differences in other counties? I am a Green Party Senator from Waterford. I met Mr. David Niblock, Focus Ireland’s south east co-ordinator, about a year ago when we visited some of the housing the organisation provides. I am concerned about the energy standards that apply when renovations are being carried out. We need to provide cosy homes for tenants. The Government should provide additional funding to ensure the accommodation offered by Focus Ireland to people who need housing is of good quality in terms of energy efficiency.

I have some concerns. The witnesses spoke about systems change and a change in culture. How will this come about? Members have been given some tasks that would help change the system. I am concerned because the cost of living is increasing. Will the gap between the haves and have-not increase in the next three years? We have a problem with supply and homelessness has become a concern. The word “resilience” and the actions being taken to build resilience jumped out of the reports. It is extremely important that the Government recognises the importance of the educational aspect to avoid the crisis that people are experiencing.

The Acting Chairman, Deputy Ó Broin, spoke about strike-off. In County Waterford people who refuse accommodation based on their personal circumstances, for example, because a child has a disability, are being struck off. Some of these cases are complex. What can be done to ensure local authorities recognise that people presenting as homeless are not just a number in their little red books but individuals with complex cases who need to be shown respect on that basis?

I thank the witnesses for their presentations, which have given members some clear direction. What more can the Government do to support Focus Ireland and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in light of the importance of the work they do?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eoin Ó Broin): Senator Murnane O’Connor wishes to make a brief supplementary point.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: With how many local authorities does Focus Ireland work? Every time the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government appears before the joint committee, I speak about the housing assistance payment and the system but I do not believe he is listening. Have the witnesses met the Minister to discuss their reports? What has been the Minister's feedback with regard to the system and the possibility of introducing an additional appeals mechanism as a temporary measure? We have a housing crisis which I hope will be resolved in the next year or two. I have asked the Minister to introduce some form of appeals mechanism. Have the witnesses discussed the matter with the Minister?

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. During Senator Murnane O'Connor's contribution, I was struck by something which I would like to share because it illustrates the extent of the problem. A number of county councillors have made representations to Wicklow County Council on this issue. I have received in writing a clear policy statement from the county council, which has had a number of chief executives, including acting chief executives, in the past year or two. No one in the Customs House seems to be interested in addressing this issue. I refer to the refusal on the part of Wicklow County Council to allow public representatives to advocate or accompany people affected by the homeless crisis. When I sought to make representations on behalf of a woman I met, the executive of the council refused to meet me. I forced the issue by insisting on having the reasons for the county council's refusal to meet me set out in writing.

I was contacted by a woman with literacy and mental health problems who has been in and out of Newcastle hospital. The county council refused to allow county councillors, Deputies or Senators to accompany her to meet officials. This is a measure of the difficulties being experienced by public representatives.

The witnesses made a number of recommendations and members will not fall short in terms of pursuing them, whether through legislation or guidelines.

Mr. Mike Allen: Mr. Ó Siochrú's research covered many areas of the country because it dealt with all the services that are providing prevention services and being funded by Bord Gáis. The research carried out by Dr. Walsh and Mr. Harvey is focused on Dublin only because it essentially studied the family action team, which is funded by the four local authorities in Dublin. In general, when carrying out research, we try to look outside Dublin. An increasing proportion of homelessness is in Dublin but we need to be clear about what is happening elsewhere. We also have a greater capacity in Dublin to understand what is happening from where we are sitting because of the range of services we run. There tends to be a slightly greater level of fragmentation outside Dublin and Focus Ireland is not necessarily in a position to do the research. It is not right that the largest research budget in homelessness is being provided by a voluntary sector organisation and funded by individual donations and corporate support. The State should allocate a percentage of the money it is spending on homelessness for the type of research work Focus Ireland and others are doing. It is in a much better position to do this work and it should then publish the findings because many of the reports carried out by the State are not published.

Focus Ireland does not operate in all counties, specifically in the west and midlands where we work with partners. Our services are different in different counties, depending on history, our relationships with the relevant local authority and so forth.

We meet the Minister reasonably regularly and we will meet the new principal officer on housing, Mr. David Kelly, later this morning when he visits Focus Ireland's offices. These meetings are constructive in broad terms, although we have a fundamental disagreement with

the Department. Nevertheless, we also recognise the progress being made and work being done.

A question was asked about what will happen in the next three years. Housing is being delivered in the private sector, through new social housing units and, I understand, through an increase in rented accommodation. The demand for housing is growing faster than the supply. That means the problem is going to get worse, which inevitably will squeeze some people out and into homelessness. There is a lack of acknowledgment of those facts both in terms of the aspirations or targets to deliver housing and planning to deal with the scale of the problem we will continue to face for the next three years. This is the first time in my experience of working in homelessness where the Government is not saying it intends to end homelessness and outlining a timescale. There has been a lot of sneering at the attempts to do that before but we achieved an enormous amount in the run up to 2010, with which Deputy Ó Broin and others will be familiar. The fact that we failed does not mean we should give up on our aspiration to end homelessness. It would be much easier, more motivating and meaningful for everybody involved if we identified a period where we acknowledge that the situation will get worse, when we genuinely expect it to turn a corner and what we will do then. Our fear is that as soon as that corner is turned public attention will move away from these issues and these families and single people will be left in hubs or in emergency accommodation. Our fear is that we will get used to this high level of homelessness and it will become normalised. To avoid that situation we need the sort of plan that the Oireachtas laid out. We would say that the work that was done by the last committee, or the committee that existed in the period before this Government was formed, set out an agenda. For example, Sláintecare is constantly referred to, although people will argue about the extent to which the policy has framed the response to the health issue, and is acknowledged as the framework. Unfortunately, that has not been the case with housing and homelessness. The targets that were set have not been adopted and we are still using the targets from before. We could list many things that the Government needs to do. We do not need to make up a new list because the committee has already done a lot of that work and the Government should revert back to that report as a framework in terms of its ambition.

Mr. Brian Harvey: Senators Murnane O'Connor and Grace O'Sullivan asked what can we do now, which is a good question that I will respond to in two ways. First, the big picture is about the issues that Mr. Allen has described. Second, we must increase the supply of local authority accommodation because that will take the pressure out of the system and, in terms of our concern in particular, the measure will ensure that homeless people get housed quicker, better, more affordably and in more secure ways. I would like to stress that our report has laid out short-term and procedural actions that can be changed quite quickly and are not costly.

The real problem is that many local authorities are in denial about this issue around treatment and the procedures that cause great stress, humiliation and so on. There are two parts to this matter. First, as has already been identified, it is important that all homeless people get caseworkers and advocacy workers. Second, there should be no waiting list for them while their vulnerability increases. In an ideal world they should not need caseworkers and advocacy workers if the system worked well but I digress.

In terms of who can do what regarding these changes, whether it is from storage depots, two strikes and out, prevention, signing in and so on, there is a sense in which local authorities will deny that. They may well regard Focus Ireland and ourselves, as researchers, as a nuisance to whom one does not need to pay an awful lot of attention. The Minister and his Department should send out clear and unambiguous signals about what Deputy O'Dowd spoke about, which

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is the need for respect, better treatment, better procedures and revising, considering, changing and improving them from top to bottom. I can assure members that they would be much more likely to listen to the Minister than to us. I also suspect they would be much more likely to listen to members than to us. Naming the issue, identifying it and bringing this measure up to ministerial and departmental levels to ensure the practical changes are made and signals are sent to the local authorities about what is appropriate and what is not would help. That is the small but absolutely vital picture that will improve exits from homelessness over the next number of years.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eoin Ó Broin): Before we conclude I wish to thank Dr. Kathy Walsh, Mr. Brian Harvey, Mr. Seán Ó Siochrú, Mr. Mike Allen and Ms Sarah Sheridan for their presentations today. I formally propose to the committee that we write to the Minister and seek a specific written response to the recommendations contained in the two reports. Is that agreed? I thank everyone for agreeing to my proposal. That is very useful and it is something that is important to our agenda, which we will follow up and we will be in touch with the organisations in the future.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.15 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 22 February 2018.