

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM THITHÍOCHT, PLEANÁIL AGUS RIALTAS ÁITIÚIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, PLANNING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Déardaoin, 4 Iúil 2019

Thursday, 4 July 2019

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Mick Barry,	Victor Boyhan,
Pat Casey,	Jennifer Murnane O'Connor.
Fergus O'Dowd,	
Eoin Ó Broin.	

I láthair/In attendance: Senator John Dolan.

Teachta/Deputy Maria Bailey sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session until 10.03 a.m.

Housing for People with a Disability: Discussion

Chairman: No. 6 on our agenda is housing for people with a disability. I welcome Mr. Tony Cunningham from the Irish Wheelchair Association and Ms Siobhán Barron, Dr. Gerald Craddock and Mr. Edward Crean of the National Disability Authority to the meeting. Before we begin, I draw the attention of the witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the joint committee. If, however, 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 or her identifiable.

I invite Mr. Cunningham to make his opening statement.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: The Irish Wheelchair Association, IWA, as a representative organisation for people with physical disabilities, extends its thanks to the committee for the invitation to be here today and the opportunity to contribute to its work regarding housing for people with disabilities in Ireland. The IWA has a vision of an Ireland where people with disabilities enjoy equal rights, choices and opportunities in how they live their lives, and where our country is a model worldwide for a truly inclusive society. Since the IWA's foundation in 1960 by ten people who were all wheelchair users, one of the single biggest issues facing people with physical disabilities has been access to the built environment, including public buildings such as Leinster House, hotels, retail outlets and footpaths to name but a few. Over the decades, considerable progress has been achieved with the revision of building regulations, the design of new buildings and retrofitting of older buildings - again such as Leinster House, where there has been much improvement - and the upgrading of roads and footpaths. This work has supported people with physical disabilities to have more access to the community and to participate in and contribute to society and the economy.

However, one of the remaining and ongoing challenges for people with physical disabilities, particularly for people who are wheelchair users, is the distinct lack of suitable and affordable housing, social housing, private housing and private rental housing. Despite the many achievements of the national housing strategy for people with a disability, IWA members who are wheelchair users and who are registered and approved for social housing have not been receiving offers of housing. Many people having been on local authority housing lists for years and years with no offer in sight, including some of my colleagues who are present today. The contribution and recommendations made by the IWA to the Oireachtas committee today are based on the long-standing experiences of its members; on the IWA's experiences as an approved housing body, AHB, and member of the Irish Council for Social Housing, ICSH; on IWA membership of local housing and disability steering groups, HDSGs, in local authorities; on its membership of the advisory group and monitoring committee to the national housing strategy; and, mainly, from the experiences of IWA members who are full-time wheelchair users.

People who are full-time wheelchair users need housing that is designed differently from standard housing, and I do not mean in the form of extras or adaptations. Standard housing is not built to this type of design, but is built to comply with Part M of the building regulations which requires housing to be visitable. We would all love to be able to visit a house but we would also like to live in such a house. In Part M of the building regulations 2010, “visitable housing” means where people can safely and conveniently approach and gain access, people can have access to the main habitable rooms at entry level and a WC is provided at entry level.

The strategic design and delivery of fully wheelchair accessible social housing is the IWA’s focus today in making recommendations to the committee. The recommendations are intended to support the strategic planning, design and delivery of wheelchair accessible social housing to meet the identified housing needs of people with disabilities who require wheelchair accessible housing. The IWA recommends the following actions. The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government should ensure that the local authority application form for social housing support, which is currently being revised, has a specific question to record a wheelchair accessible housing requirement. Currently, it is quite complex to extract the information on wheelchair accessibility and there are at least three questions to be answered, combined with a general practitioner, GP, and occupational therapist, OT, report, to get the relevant information. The IWA’s recommendation is to include one question asking whether the respondent requires a wheelchair accessible house.

The IWA also recommends that the local authority housing IT system be reviewed to reflect the details of the form and have the capacity to generate the relevant reports to support strategic planning and reporting on the delivery of housing. Every local authority would review its current approved social housing list to identify the number of people who require wheelchair accessible housing. As we understand it, that information is not readily available in all local authorities.

The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government has agreed wheelchair accessible housing design specifications with the Irish Wheelchair Association, IWA and other stakeholders, and local authorities will plan strategically to ensure that 7% of every social housing development funded by the Exchequer is designed to be wheelchair accessible, thus promoting sustainable communities.

The Building Regulations (Part M Amendment) Regulations 2010 should be reviewed to include wheelchair accessible housing design, similar to the UK. I look forward to discussing these in more detail.

Chairman: I invite Ms Siobhán Barron to make her opening statement.

Ms Siobhán Barron: On behalf of the National Disability Authority, NDA, I thank the Chairman and members of the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government for the opportunity to make a presentation on housing for persons with disabilities. The NDA is an independent statutory body, and while it is not a representative body, it was established to provide independent and evidence-informed advice to the Minister for Justice and Equality on matters of policy and practice relevant to the lives of persons with disabilities. A function of the NDA is to promote the adoption of a universal design approach to the built environment, products, services and ICT so that they can be easily accessed, understood and used independently to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, size, ability or disability. That broadens the remit of the NDA beyond disability. The NDA engages with many stakeholders, in particular the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the

Housing Agency, on issues relevant to persons with disabilities.

Based on the returns from Census 2016, we know there are more than 640,000 persons with disabilities in Ireland. Most persons with a disability will have acquired their disability, especially in adult life. We are talking about all types of disability, from physical, sensory and intellectual disability to mental health, autism and sensory impairments. Persons with disabilities are more likely to rely on local authority housing than other citizens - 12.8% compared with 8.3% of the general population. This arises particularly where persons with disabilities have poorer employment prospects than others, and it is also due to higher costs they may have related to their disability. Therefore they may be more dependent on the State for support in securing a permanent home. This generates a demand for more social housing options.

The right to adequate housing has its origins in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 and the international conventions that followed. In particular, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006, UNCPRD, which was ratified by the Government last year, further elaborates on the meaning of the right to adequate housing as it relates to persons with disabilities. The convention creates a new benchmark for the realisation of the right of persons with disabilities to adequate housing through Article 19, which refers to living independently and being included in the community. This requires that Ireland delivers on the rights of persons with disabilities to “live in the community with choices equal to others” and to “have the opportunity to choose their place of residence and where and with whom they live”. This is at the heart of the policy of decongregation being progressed by the HSE, but is also relevant to persons with disabilities in the community who, for example, may wish to move out of the family home. Article 28 of the UNCPRD requires the State to deliver on the right to “adequate housing” and to “ensure access by persons with disabilities to public housing programmes”.

The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government has made a number of commitments regarding persons with disabilities under various strategies on housing, including the Social Housing Strategy 2020, Rebuilding Ireland, and in the National Disability Inclusion Strategy, NDIS, 2017-2021. The Department’s National Housing Strategy for People with a Disability 2011-2016 has been incorporated into Rebuilding Ireland and extended to 2020 for delivery. The NDA was on the Department’s advisory group and related subgroups on the development of that strategy, and is on the Department’s implementation monitoring group for that strategy.

The Department affirms the commitment to implementing the national housing strategy in the national disability inclusion strategy, NDIS. The NDIS is undergoing a mid-term review, and the NDA suggests that there is an opportunity to strengthen actions therein on housing for persons with disabilities. To date we know a number of actions have been progressed under the national housing strategy, including for example, the designing housing to meet the needs of all toolkit and website as a resource for housing authorities, developers and housing providers to develop and design housing projects to be inclusive, adaptive and accessible. There are also actions progressed to promote the take-up of the capital assistance scheme, CAS, for persons with disabilities and to streamline the application and decision process. There was the production of a summary of social housing assessments on households qualified for social housing support who have yet to have their needs met. A guide by the Housing Agency on the housing assessment and allocation process for persons with disabilities was produced to assist local authority staff in applications and managing waiting lists. There has been some streamlining of the housing adaptation grants scheme, with rising numbers of grants paid each year. There

have been advances in making housing related application processes more accessible. Housing and disability steering committees were established in each local authority. These are just a few examples of what has been achieved, and even within those, further work will be needed to achieve greater impact on access to housing for persons with disabilities. The NDA has been advising on the various initiatives and will continue to do so within its independent role.

At the same time, the NDA notes that there are more goals that have yet to be realised within the national housing strategy, given that it has to be completed next year. While decongregation of persons with disabilities from institutional living arrangements to community living continues, it has been acknowledged that the original timeframe of 2019 for decongregation will not be met, so that timeframe will need to be extended. Some of the delays relating in part to access to housing are due to the need to tender and retender for refurbishments and to planning permission issues. The NDA continues to advise on such matters, including conducting an evaluation project for learning from decongregation.

Changes in the structure and delivery of housing benefits cannot alone make it easier for persons with disabilities to secure accommodation. There are difficulties accessing private rental accommodation not only because of the lack of accessible properties but also because many persons with disabilities are priced out of the rental market. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC's recently published annual report states that it is apparent that there is systemic discrimination against people in general in receipt of housing social welfare payments and that persons with disabilities are more than twice as likely to report discrimination relating to housing and over 1.6 times more likely to live in poor conditions.

Scarce resources are, understandably, being directed to dealing with those in emergency accommodation and experiencing homelessness. The issue of homelessness for those with disabilities and mental health difficulties needs particular attention and the NDA will be funding research on this shortly. There have been difficulties with a lack of uniformity across the country on combining an offer of housing with the availability of an appropriate care package.

We recognise the housing crisis means not enough houses are being built to meet needs, but it is important in addressing this that the right type of housing is being built to meet the needs of persons with disabilities and the changing needs of householders who may acquire a disability over time. We advise that Part M of the building regulations of 2010 needs to be reviewed and updated, with due regard to the NDA's universal design homes guidelines so that the accessibility standard for new builds would be higher.

While we have a summary of social housing needs assessment, further work is required to ensure robust data to plan housing to meet housing needs. Actively considering the potential for better collection of data on accessible housing and the range of housing available would also be helpful.

The type of housing we build, how it is designed and where it is located all impact on the individual. The long-term benefits from housing, following a universal design approach, could realise savings to the State in health and social care, could help alleviate the challenges presented by climate change and could help improve the well-being and fabric of communities. The NDA has been engaging with many stakeholders, including local authorities and the Department, on the adoption of a universal design approach to housing. We welcome the recent commitment by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Department of Health, in their recent policy statement on Housing Options for Our Ageing Population, to ensuring that 30% of all new dwellings will be built to incorporate universal design principles

to accommodate our ageing population. We also welcome the report last year of this joint committee in which it recommended looking at universal design and a cost-benefit analysis. That is included in the NDA's work plan and we will be commencing a scoping exercise on that shortly. The focus on universal design in older housing stock sets an important precedent that should also prove to be important for persons with disabilities. The NDA will continue to engage with professional bodies such as Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland, RIAI, and third level institutions like the Technological University of Dublin to embed a universal design approach in the relevant academic and professional courses, in order to provide the skilled practitioners that will be required to plan, design and construct universal design homes. We are also working with bodies and continuous professional development in this regard.

The NDA is also aware of the particular needs of persons with mental health difficulties and the needs of persons with autism. We have previously published guidelines for persons with mental health difficulties as well as guidance for local authority officers to assist persons with autism.

The NDA has also briefed the Housing Agency about the importance of preparing officials working in local authorities on their potential roles under the Assisted Decision Making Capacity Act 2015. When the Act is operational, it will be up to local authority housing officers to be as supportive as they can to applicants who may have capacity issues in making decisions on housing. The Housing Agency has been very proactive in engaging with the NDA about the development of its own guidance in this regard.

Like other countries, our population is living longer and the number of older persons is growing. It is expected that the numbers of persons with disabilities will increase by approximately 20% by 2026. This has particular implications for housing and supported living in the community, and the need to ensure a sustainable housing model in Ireland. There is, therefore, an obligation on all stakeholders involved in planning, design and construction to take action to achieve this. There are various strategies and policies in place that when fully implemented can help progress access to housing for persons with disabilities in Ireland, particularly as part of mainstream housing developments. As well as the greater need for social housing, we advise that there should be a greater emphasis on creating liveable and sustainable neighbourhoods where persons with disabilities can live full and active lives as part of a real community.

Deputy Pat Casey took the Chair.

Vice Chairman: I thank Ms Barron for her presentation.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the representatives from the Irish Wheelchair Association, the National Disability Authority and everyone else for their presence. In particular, I welcome Senator John Dolan who has an amazing track record in advocating for the disability sector, which I am sure is acknowledged by everyone in both Houses of the Oireachtas.

I thank Mr. Cunningham and Ms Barron for their quality submissions. We received other submissions that we have circulated and read. I thank the representatives for taking us through them again. The strong message that has come across from all of this is that we should provide the capacity to live independently with dignity and respect in the community. A home is more than just a house. Living is more than just a roof over one's head. Living is about being able to access one's community facilities. It is about meaningful engagement in one's community. It is about having equal access to that engagement be it to partake in one's community, employment or whatever. A lot of the committee's emphasis can be about housing, and bricks and mortar

but the organisations present went further and rightly so.

Today's meeting is the first of two meetings on housing for people with disabilities and the second meeting is scheduled for 10 July. There will be other representatives from local government and Dublin City Council. Housing is part of a process and what the representatives have shared with us today will feed into the bigger picture of policy, which is welcome.

I was struck by recent research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission that shows people with disabilities were twice as likely to experience discrimination when accessing housing, which is profound and disturbing. We need to do something about the situation. I make that point because it came out in the literature. I was not fully aware of such discrimination and only had anecdotal evidence. However, the other day I spoke to a woman who lives in one of the Dublin local authority areas and she has waited nearly 12 years for housing. Every time she approaches her authority she is told she can have accommodation eight or nine miles away from where her supports are located. I mean the people who care about her, love her and are there for her. When she makes her case she is told that she is choosy and difficult, which she finds very frustrating. She needs to live on the groundfloor. She also needs to be able to access a community on the street because that is where she goes out to read her newspaper. Her limited access allows her to get out in and around there.

Earlier today it was clearly confirmed that the targets and timelines to transition people with disabilities away from congregated settings have not been reached. That is extremely disappointing because this is a group of people who have historically had other issues and difficulties. The decongregation and transference of people from institutional care back into the community was flagged as being a progressive bit of work. I live near one of these institutions that is now closed. The people did not have happy experiences on many occasions and were forced out. The move was not altogether about making facilities better for them. They were taken many miles away from where they had lived for ten years and away from where they had built friendships and relationships. Clearly this is a very important issue so what is the problem with accessing housing? These people live in congregated settings. The Government policy is to close these places down and get people out. I always argue that there will be some people who want to stay in more formal residential settings. Housing has to be all about rights and choices. I have met people who have been forced to move from community settings into independent living arrangements but were not given supports and, therefore, did not like the new arrangement. We must respect all aspects of this issue. This is about empowering a person to make decisions about where he or she wants to live. I ask the witnesses to share their views on this matter. Is there a process of review? If so, what is the review mechanism? What do the witnesses think about Departments and relevant agencies in terms of people being moved from congregated settings into communities? Why is the transition not happening as fast as first envisioned? What are the pitfalls and problems? How does one overcome the pitfalls and problems?

Can the witnesses share with us their experiences of how local authorities have addressed the public housing needs for people with disabilities? In my experience, some local authorities are good and progressive yet other authorities tell people they do not have the facilities. The Part V obligation was mentioned by one of the witnesses. Sometimes local authorities offset developments, particularly small one-off developments by taking money or by dealing with other issues but these strike me as ideal situations.

The following point was well made in one of the submissions. We do not want disability

zones. We want people living meaningfully right across the community so it strikes me that there are opportunities for one-off units, particularly in the private sector. We need to ensure that the target of 7% happens in both the public and private sectors. Also, there are elderly people who have different degrees of disability. I ask the witnesses to talk me through this aspect.

The Part V obligation is very contentious in some local authorities and they are not delivering. I ask the witnesses to comment further on the issue.

The RIAI has given us a brief questions and answers submission, which the witnesses have not seen. I am sure that the committee will be happy to circulate it to the witnesses. The RIAI compared this country with other European countries and said: “We understand that Ireland has no mandatory standards for either accessible or adaptable housing”, and it is badly needed, with which I agree. I ask the witnesses to talk us through how they advocate for that because if the work of this committee is to have meaning and take the work of the delegations further, then clearly we need mandatory standards in legislation.

Finally, I wish to draw attention to Fingal County Council as it has recently drawn up an excellent document entitled 10 Ways To Construct A More Lifetime Adaptable and Age Friendly Home. The document is really positive and conveys its message simply. I appeal to the organisations present to not only engage with local authorities but to engage with the elected members of local authorities because they will find them to be advocates who will advocate for the objectives that we all want. Sometimes we tend to rely on the executive, architects and housing officials, be they in local authorities or Departments. I suggest that the organisations present would be much more effective as well as keeping them onboard to advocate and to have a similar engagement with them as they are having with us here. I urge them to have that engagement with local authorities because it would be fruitful and generate good results.

Again, well done. I thank the witnesses for their very detailed submissions and ask them to address the few queries that I have raised.

Ms Siobhán Barron: I thank the Senator for acknowledging our input and for his questions.

On the issue of decongregation, it is established Government policy to move away from institutional care. The National Disability Authority has over many years undertaken research, considered the experience in other countries and the quality of life that can be achieved. We have come across cases where it was believed it would not be possible or it would not work out and people were reluctant to move. Where it has been done effectively and people have been well supported, it has had immense and incredible benefits for them. It immensely improved their quality of life. Effective transition and how people are supported through the process is important. Decongregating and lining up the right package of supports in the community is a complex process. The move from traditional services and a culture of care in segregated service provision to an independent living arrangement in a community is a big move. There is a lot of work to be done with the staff, the services and the community to make that work. We heard from a stakeholder from another European country that there is a lead-in period of one year for any individual for it to work effectively. It takes time for a person to get accustomed to the idea, to work through the options in terms of with whom they want to live and where they want to live and to put all of that in place. We know that sometimes there is inconsistency in terms of lining up care packages and finding accommodation. In the current housing crisis, finding the right kind of accessible accommodation is proving difficult. In terms of other policy areas, universal design, for example, can help alleviate some of those pressures. There are many actors that have a role to play in making decongregation work.

We are engaged in an evaluation project in regard to the situation for 600 persons with disabilities, one quarter of whom are people moving from institutions to the community. We are interviewing them before they move and after they move to the community to understand the impact the move has had on their lives, their experience and so on. We are also examining the cost of those new models of support. The big challenge is access to adequate investment to fund the type of support packages that are needed and funding to support transition and to ensure access to mainstream services within the community. There are a lot of issues at stake to make decongregation effective.

We are familiar with the ESRI research and other research which indicates that more people with disabilities are living with deprivation. They are living in poor accommodation and in some of the more deprived areas as well. This is an issue of affordability of accommodation. There is even more need to focus on access to housing for persons with disabilities. We have been engaging with a lot of local authorities. I take the point in terms of broadening that engagement. We have had some good experience. We are very familiar with the Fingal County Council document. We work closely with the council in that regard. We welcome that initiative to progress that. We have seen other positive initiatives by other local authorities, including in Wexford where the authority has set a target of 20% in respect of all housing developments of more than five houses to be of universal design with a focus on access to housing for persons with disabilities. We need more consistency in this regard. We have developed technical guidelines in regard to the universal design, which cover three levels of housing. There is information and guidance to support some type of development of standards and templates for housing for the future.

I hope I have covered all of the Senator's questions.

Vice Chairman: I thank Ms Barron and I invite Mr. Cunningham to respond.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I will start with the congregated settings element, although it is not an area with which we work directly. In terms of housing, the members of the Irish Wheelchair Association, IWA, are community-based. We are talking about people who could be living with their parents and their siblings who have never had the opportunity to have a home of their own due to lack of finance to purchase or build, lack of social housing, lack of available housing to rent and high renting cost. We are also talking about people who are inappropriately placed in nursing homes and hospitals, people who are homeless who are wheelchair users, and people who have a disability. These are two very different groups of people. What is common to everybody is humanity and a person's right to have a home. We all get institutionalised one way or another, be that in a large institution of 100 rooms or one's family home with one's family, but we get used to that. As a country, we have an obligation to lead and to encourage people to flourish, to become independent and to experience that which they do not necessarily know. Many of us can be sheltered within our own workspace, living environment or social environment. It is through new experiences that one builds confidence. If someone had asked me 20 years ago to attend a meeting in Leinster House to talk to this committee I would have replied, "not on your nanny", yet here I am. Experiences bring growth. The Government has to encourage growth and give people the opportunities to grow.

IWA's vision is one of Ireland being a country that would lead in terms of its inclusivity. We are not doing that. We should be ashamed in terms of the lack of housing for people with disabilities. In terms of Part 8, an approved housing body can engage with a local authority in regard to the purchase of a housing estate that is being developed that does not comprise any wheelchair accessible housing. The Irish Wheelchair Association would also like to be able to

engage under Part 8 but at the design stage to acquire some units for wheelchair users through capital assistance scheme, CAS, funding. However, the design and planning stages are completed before the houses are released for purchase to the approved housing bodies or the local authorities. The local authority, with the support of the Department, will give the go-ahead for these estates because they might comprise 100 three-bedroom, semi-detached, two-storey houses that will house families. There is no sustainable community in terms of people with disabilities or older people. Anecdotally, many local authorities would have accepted the funding from the Part V obligation or a one-off house in another location. For obvious reasons, it could be two or three years before the development comes to its end. We have an immediate housing need now such that when developers offer one or two units in another location or in an apartment block, the local authorities seize the opportunity to provide somebody with housing immediately. In my view and that of the Irish Wheelchair Association, we need strategic planning at the early stages to ensure we have inclusive communities throughout Ireland. Where State funding is being used to provide housing, there must be investment in sustainable housing developments of mixed tenure. This is provided for in policy.

In preparing for this meeting, the thought crossed my mind that we could build a few houses with all of the documentation on this issue. The intent and the policies exist but early stage design is not happening. Following on from discussions with various disability organisations, we have proposed that 7% of every development be wheelchair accessible, but not wheelchair exclusive, homes. This is about the structural design being such that it caters for wheelchair users. In regard to Part V opportunities, I am sure some of them are availed of but many of them are being lost.

On personal assistance, PA, services, the IWA pre-budget submission, which I am sure members have received, calls for an additional 500,000 personal assistance hours nationally for people with disabilities to touch the need that is not being met currently. There is definitely a clear link between the two issues. In theory, it all stands up. We need houses for the personal assistants to kick in but there is no housing. It is not being designed or built and there does not appear to be any strategic planning around it. The goodwill is there but the offers are not coming out. We need both. We need the PA hours and houses. Incidentally, all of these issues are contributing to the economy. If people get their independence, they can work. Personal assistants are employees as well. All of this generates income and inclusive societies.

Vice Chairman: I thank Mr. Cunningham. I will take questions now in groups of two, starting with Senator Murnane O'Connor and Deputy Ó Broin.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank all the witnesses for being here today. All of us here are aware of the importance of housing for people with disabilities. I sat on the board of the Carlow branch of the Irish Wheelchair Association for eight or nine years and I still attend its AGMs. At every annual general meeting the first things to come up are lack of housing, footpaths, entrances to buildings and awareness. Today we need to go forward because, as some of the centre users say, it not until a person is in the position of using a wheelchair or a buggy that he or she realises how bad it is to go to town using footpaths. Again, that is life and it is not until one's own family is hit by it through having someone with a disability or an elderly person, that we realise. Awareness of what is happening is so important.

I have constantly said that when it comes to housing we need to talk about what is being built in Ireland and to address the issues. We seem to be building only one type of housing. That is concerning because we have many people who are living longer and we have more people with disabilities. Many houses being built seem tight, especially for wheelchairs. I

notice many of the houses being built recently are not suitable. I have dealt with older people, people with disabilities and maybe people who have got multiple sclerosis later in life or something like that. The houses they are actually living in are not able to take a wheelchair. This is a long-term issue. These are houses that were built privately or by the local authority. We need to look at the issue of people who have to use a wheelchair in the long term. If we build a house, whether it is two-storey house or whatever, it should be fitted on the lower floor for wheelchair accessibility, but many are not.

I have a concern in dealing with local authorities that children with disabilities are not given a preference. It is concerning that a child might have particular needs within a family. We need to ensure that happens. It is a priority for me anyway.

My colleague, Senator John Dolan, has gone to all the local authorities. I wish to compliment him on the work he has done. I will outline the figures for my area of Carlow. We have a population of 56,932 living in Carlow. Of this, 8,237, or 14%, have at least one disability. That is why we need to ensure we improve on this for people. There is definitely an issue with housing. Over 8,000 people have disabilities. That is so unfair. I find in my work representing people with disabilities or those in a wheelchair that they are not made the priority they should be. We need to look at that. We may even need to look at legislating or else ensure that priority is given to every local authority such that a wheelchair user or anyone with a disability has first priority. Then we need to look at building. Again, building is a major issue given that 17% of people with a disability are in social housing compared with 11% of the general population. A total of 17% of people with a disability in Carlow live in social housing compared to 11% of the general population. That really concerns me. Moreover, people with disabilities are more than twice as likely to report discrimination in housing. They are 1.6 times more likely to live in poor conditions. These are important considerations when we are looking at providing good homes for good people.

I wish to ask a question of the National Disability Authority about something that concerns me. What are the most important housing issues now that need to be addressed in the short term?

I want to speak about disability grants because that is a major issue. There should be some sort of scheme whereby most houses have a wet room. I find that, whether for people with disabilities or elderly people, we are fighting constantly to get grants. A wet room in particular is so important. People could be waiting for months and months. People are lucky if they only have to wait for months. People with a disability need to be prioritised. These are simple things in life but, as the witnesses said, it is about quality of life. Families have become so disheartened because we are not building in the right way and we find it difficult to get the grant money for them. They are being forgotten. Again, it is a matter of awareness. What could the NDA do in the short term to ensure we prioritise people with disabilities and give them better access?

The biggest question I have is for both organisations. Do the NDA and the Irish Wheelchair Association believe it would be beneficial to have a person with a disability on the board of every affordable housing agency in every planning department of our local authorities? I believe that is where we are falling down. I think every board should have it. There should be one person with a disability on every board to do with housing. Unless someone is in that position, they really do not know what it is like. Unless we have someone from all the different agencies on all these boards, then I think we are not going to get the proper mix.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank both organisations for their submissions. I wish to acknowl-

edge that we got other written submissions, including a submission from Independent Living Movement Ireland, which are useful to us.

I wish to acknowledge two people in particular for the record. One is Ms Joan Carthy, who is present. Joan has been remarkably effective in lobbying members of this committee, myself included, to ensure the issues that we are discussing formally stay on our radar. It is important that we acknowledge that. I wish to echo the comments of Senator Boyhan about Senator John Dolan. His efforts not only individually but through the work he has done with his informal committee have ensured that the parties and some of us who many not otherwise have made the issue central to the work we are doing keep our focus. I want to genuinely acknowledge that.

One word no one has mentioned yet is “discrimination”. It is important that we name it. People do not have to deliberately go out of their way to discriminate to allow a system to be in place that discriminates. People with disabilities are among two or three groups who have always been disadvantaged in our housing system. It is a form of institutional discrimination. Those of us on the committee need to understand how to get over this problem. It is not simply about a little extra money there or a little rule change here; it is about recognising the series of institutional barriers that have been in place for decades. Unless we remove these in policy, legislation and funding, we will remain stuck in this problem. That is not to accuse any official or Minister of intentionally going out of their way but by virtue of the fact that they allow the barriers to remain in place, the discrimination and extraordinary negative impact on the lives of people are perpetuated.

This committee looks at two things. The first is housing and planning. I will come back to that in a moment. These hearings are not simply about having a nice conversation. Our intention as a committee is to produce a report with clear recommendations to go to the Minister. That is why it is really important, in the answers to the questions, that we focus on the key priorities to push the Minister on. We can do a report and have a shopping list of 100 requests, but the longer the list of requests the less likely it is that Minister and the Department will respond. If we focus sharply on the key things that, if done, would make a substantial difference, then I think our report could have an impact.

We are all constituency politicians. It is not only about people with disabilities or wheelchair users and access to housing. Along with Travellers, people with disabilities and wheelchair users are the people who spend longest in emergency accommodation. When it comes to getting out of inappropriate private rental accommodation or getting into the private sector, as with Travellers, but for different reasons, wheelchair users and people with disabilities are more disadvantaged. That is really important in terms of how we think about the recommendations.

The fact some of the recommendations from the Irish Wheelchair Association are so basic but the association still has to ask for them is astonishing. The idea that we would not have in our housing needs assessment forms a box to tick to specify that the applicant is in need of accommodation suitable to live with a wheelchair is 1960s stuff. Likewise, the idea that the housing delivery plans of local authorities do not have to assess the level of need for people with disabilities and wheelchairs in their administrative areas and five-year plans beggars belief. The demands of the association are so minimal - I do not mean in any way to disparage what the association is asking for. I would like to think that the five demands in the Irish Wheelchair Association form the absolute minimum that we ask for in our report.

While I absolutely support the 7% I want to make one caveat. It takes approximately six years to get a transfer from one local authority property to another. That is the position in South

Dublin County Council. In a sense the 7% figure should be the absolute minimum. As the speakers know far better than committee members, the lifecycle changes. A person might not need to be among the 7% of houses for the first ten, 20 or 30 years of a local authority tenancy. However, when something changes, the person may have to go on a transfer list. I acknowledge that some local authorities have a medical priority transfer list and it might take three years instead of six years - that is the waiting time in my local authority. In a sense, we really need to move to exactly what the association representatives have said, that is, universal design whereby the core structure of all new houses are easily adaptable in future. That just makes sense. It cannot cost any more in real terms for the structural basis of the house to have those key adaptable features. Obviously, the house must then be retrofitted to meet very specific needs and that involves an additional cost. While 7% is a good target, universal design is what the committee should support, at the maximal end rather than the minimal end the Department often talks about.

County and city development plans are up for review. Local authorities will all start their reviews in September. In some senses the county and city development plans are absolutely key to meeting our guests' demands. If through their plans local authorities make some of the things our guests are asking into mandatory planning requirements for both public and private sector housing stock, nobody will be able to get out of them. They will become the norm. We are having conversations at the Joint Committee on Climate Action on how to improve energy efficiency standards through building regulations and planning requirements. I would like to hear our guests' views on how our report's recommendations to the Minister can best argue for the reviews of the county and city development plans to incorporate some of these considerations so that they simply become requirements. That goes back to a point Senator Murnane O'Connor made, namely, that it is not just the design of the house, the local authority is also responsible for all other aspects of planning, including footpaths, roads and zebra crossings. Do the witnesses have specific and tight recommendations on those things?

We obviously have a lot of old stock. The adaptation grants are a perpetual source of dissatisfaction for people. Firstly the application process is very onerous, whether for a local authority tenant or a private homeowner. Even when an applicant is approved for the grant, the wait for the application can be up to three years. I only speak for my own local authority. Somebody who due to age or a change in life circumstances can no longer use the upstairs in his or her home spends nine to 12 months going through the application and approval process. He or she is then approved. In South Dublin County Council it can take two to three years for such a person to get the funding unless he or she is in the most acute circumstances. I would like to hear our guests' thoughts on how that plays out in other local authorities and what recommendations they have for it.

I would be interested to know if the National Disability Authority proactively supports and pushes central and local government to implement the recommendations in the Irish Wheelchair Association's report. They seem eminently sensible and they are not the only requirements. I would also like to ask our guests what three or four key demands they would recommend for our report. The Irish Wheelchair Association has five.

Ms Siobhán Barron: I will start with the key demands because I think they cover a lot of the points that have been raised. Some of the issues we see relate to housing planning. I refer for example to decisions on the site of very small apartments. One would question whether they would be habitable by many persons with disabilities given their different needs. That applies particularly to persons with wheelchairs, but also concerns the wider needs of others. We have

always advised that there should be a universal design approach to that. We have submitted guidance on how to approach it and we feel that it would make a significant difference if it could be addressed in the future because many large developments are being planned and invested in. We gave the example of the approach taken by one local authority which set a target for the number of universal design homes. As the Deputy noted, they can be designed in such a way that they can be easily and very cost-effectively adapted over time. We are hearing from at least one local authority area that by effective design, a standard 100 sq. m three-bedroom house can be a really accessible home. It does not represent a huge extra cost. We also hear anecdotally that the cost of developing a universal design home is about €4,500 more than the cost of an average home. We are going to carry out a cost-benefit analysis exercise, but that is the information we are hearing anecdotally. The long-term savings that can be derived from that by avoiding expensive relocation, alternative types of residential care and future retrofitting would very easily meet the increase in cost.

As the Deputy stated, a revision of Part M is urgently required and could provide the basis for making a lot of these requirements mandatory. There are potential ways to incentivise the market, particularly developers. Perhaps there could be a VAT measure to encourage more universal design developments. As pointed out earlier, the plans coming forward are sometimes already so advanced that it is difficult to row back.

We believe that a lot could be done through disability impact assessments of rules, regulations, policies and programmes. For example, we hear about cases where people have gone for affordable housing and taken out the loan, supported by the local authority, before acquiring a disability later in life. They find that the clawback provision prevents them from moving to alternative accommodation. Disability-proofing would involve looking at the rules in black and white and realising that they have a discriminatory effect on some people.

Promoting and enforcing a universal design approach is about the sustainability of communities. It allows people to live within a community rather than an area where a group of homes for persons with disabilities or older persons is clustered together. Universal design provides for that integrated approach. It allows older persons to stay in their homes for longer instead of going into nursing care. There are interesting examples of this. We operated a joint project with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, namely, the homes for smart ageing universal design challenge. The winning project looked at how an older person could remain living in a three-bedroom house, close to neighbours, services and facilities, by converting the upstairs area to a separate apartment. This could accommodate somebody who needs housing while providing an opportunity for company, a bit of security and better use of accommodation. The winning solution went on to be progressed and the Department is now funding five further projects on that. There are lots of practical things we can do, but rather than big projects it is about rolling this approach out as some kind of national programme.

In the transport sector there are good examples of persons with disabilities on boards. However it is important that there are effective means of engaging with persons with disabilities in design and planning. There are housing and disability steering committees in each local authority. We must consider how they could be more effective in their engagement, the action plans they devise and the targets in those plans. I refer also to cross-agency work. National strategies are in place but cross-departmental work must happen. In the past, each Department had a sectoral plan outlining how it would progress issues for people with disabilities, inclusion, accessibility matters and other issues. Within those plans Departments were obliged to outline how they would work collaboratively with other Departments and agencies on particular issues.

There are many ways to progress housing accessibility in that way.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I would like to come back to Senator Murnane O'Connor's comment. She raised what is the gateway to a very important concern by referring to children with disabilities throughout the country. They will have needs in the future. Historically, the Irish Wheelchair Association was very aware of the huge under-representation of people with physical disabilities on the approved housing list. In 2011, we had a national campaign on that and worked with local authorities to encourage people to think ahead and register their housing need with the local authorities. Following that campaign there was an increase of more than 200% in the number of people who registered their needs with a local authority. Given the number of adults out there we still feel there is huge under-representation on the approved housing list, not to mention the children who cannot apply at this point but will have a housing need in the future. That must be considered in terms of our bigger vision for sustainable communities. We are operating very much on a reactive basis at the moment going on the existing approved housing lists. We look at who is next on the list and how long they are on it and meet the need from that perspective. We will not have sustainable communities if the committee couples that with what I said earlier about the housing development of three-bed, semi-detached, two-storey houses with no wheelchair accessible house included among them and maps that around the country. We will have exclusive communities and more of them. That is not a society we want. We must consider children and adults and unmet need. I suggest that we step out of the immediate need and look sustainably into the coming decades to see where we want to go. I repeat what I said earlier that we are not talking about exclusively wheelchair-accessible houses. Reference was made earlier to the need to build them but before that we must focus on design. That is the key to what we are talking about here. We heard a lot about universal design, Irish Wheelchair Association standards and OT standards. It is all about the person and different levels of need. My perspective is that of a full-time wheelchair user. Advance planning is required.

On whether it is beneficial to have someone with a disability on the boards, it is a bit like talking about one's neighbour when he or she is not there; it is easy. I suggest when he or she is in front of one, one is more considered. I agree with Deputy Ó Broin's observation earlier, it is a simple thing to have a person with a disability on any committee or board and it is always a good thing.

For those who have not seen it already, I extend an invitation to members of the committee who have not had the experience of living accommodation for people who are full-time wheelchair users in inappropriate accommodation. We would be happy to co-ordinate visits to inappropriate and best practice housing developments. We could talk until the cows come home, but it is when one gets the experience of people and how they live that it will impact. I extend the invitation and I will leave it with the Chair to come back if there is an interest. We would be happy to facilitate that.

Deputy Ó Broin's question was directed at the NDA, but I will respond from my experience of working with the housing and disability steering groups. Honestly, the good intention is there. Very often, I wonder if some of them are a complete waste of time in terms of outcomes. One has travel expenses and time and people must come from all over the place, but I question what the outcomes are in a lot of cases. There are great outcomes in some areas, but it is questionable in others. From my experience, people do what they are required to do. I would bring that back to the Minister and to the Department. That is what people will target. I am not so sure about going straight to the county development plans to review them. What will go into them is what has to go into them from a policy perspective higher than the local authorities and

back to the Department.

I will finish by bringing the Senator back to our recommendations on the 7% target and housing specification design. I have an interesting practical point to make. We built seven houses under CAS funding. We had a site in Belmullet in Mayo. We built seven wheelchair-accessible houses there which we opened in 2017. They are fabulous houses. They have afforded great independence to the tenants who are in them. Some have started working since they moved into the house. It would do one's heart good to hear the transformation in their lives. One of the things that was a battle as we went along was the size and the extra cost of doing what was needed. On one of my visits with a tenant I was in the main bedroom of the house which has a second small bedroom. The size was reduced from the original size because the houses were too expensive and they were an extra cost to the Exchequer. What they effectively might have said to some people is that they would remain single. They would not get a double bed and they or others would not go around both sides of the bed. It was about extras, not about living or independence. There is good practice and bad practice. We must agree a specification for the various types of housing - one bed, two bed and three bed - and accept the fact there is a requirement for a certain space, not extra space. The houses must be designed to meet the needs of the person and it must be accepted that they cost more than standard housing. I suggest that must be done at ministerial and departmental level.

Vice Chairman: I extend a warm welcome to Senator Dolan and acknowledge the work he has done in the sector.

Senator John Dolan: I am being embarrassed this morning. I am delighted to be here. I welcome the witnesses and, equally, the contributions of my three Oireachtas colleagues. I am in and out of various committees on a regular basis and on this occasion every one of them brought not just an interest but knowledge, expertise and a commitment to the issue. I understand that not everyone on an Oireachtas committee has a depth of information and expertise on a given issue but we had three master classes from Oireachtas colleagues this morning. The synergy between what came from the witnesses and the committee members is rarely seen and I wish to underline it. I understand that other members do not have in-depth knowledge. It is not a veiled criticism of other colleagues. This is a rare moment and I hope we will have more of them in various committees. This is the third committee meeting I have attended this week. I was at the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade on Tuesday and the Joint Committee on Health yesterday. It is the first time I attended three committees in the one week.

The Irish Wheelchair Association's pre-budget submission contains three recommendations for budget 2020. It is interesting that housing is in the middle. Assisted living is to one side of it and transport is to the other. It is a picture of interlocking pieces that outline the support people need to be able to effectively live in the community. One lives in a house to be part of a community. Some people will need the assisted living supports for that and they will need adaptations in their accommodation. It is all about not spending 24 hours a day, seven days a week in the house. As I often say, it is about being out and about.

I have been involved with both organisations. I was on the board of the NDA for a number of years when it commenced and I was an employee of the IWA for 20 years from 1980 to 2000. The IWA has a magnificent track record in the Dáil. In the early 1970s it was raising the building regulations for housing, footpaths and a range of issues. We did not get Part M until it was legislated for in the 1990s. The mobility allowance is another initiative supported by the IWA. In the mid-1960s, a man who is now long deceased, Liam Maguire, was a champion of driving and accommodation for people with disabilities. The current benefits date back to the work he

did in the 1960s. He kicked off the movement to make air travel accessible. They are part of the legacy of the organisation. In other spaces, we think about the IWA as being a big service provider, but it has had a marvellous track record over 15 or more years in practical advocacy for people to be out and about and this is a lovely opportunity for me to put that on the record.

The committee has another suite of hearings coming up and it will produce a report. In many ways, Deputy Ó Broin almost did a first draft of the foreword or introduction to the report. Many of the points he mentioned are important. I became aware of an issue that arose at the Joint Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport that fits very nicely with this whole area. It published a report after meeting disabled organisations and so on. One of its recommendations was for the Minister to appear before it every six months and respond to the overall list of recommendations, thereby keeping the issue alive and giving it traction. That is an important element.

I was struck by another couple of elements that might go into the report. The NDA mentioned the issue of demographics and the 20% increase in the number of people with disabilities within the next seven years. We had better wake up. The number of people with disabilities in local authority accommodation as a percentage of the population is 50% higher compared with the rest of the population. Deprivation is a concern in that regard. These issues need to be set out in the report.

Turning to the active involvement of other Departments, I undertook a piece of work last year with the Departments of Education and Skills, Health, and Employment Affairs and Social Protection. We examined interconnections in terms of job activation and so on. There are 15 or 16 Departments, so please do not name them all, but will the witnesses name the two or, at most, three that need to pull together if we are to move this on more effectively? Given the demographics involved in this issue specifically but also more broadly, and in light of the interconnectedness between that and the value for money of investments, we must view this in terms of investment in services as distinct from the micro cost of a square foot of space or whatever.

Rebuilding Ireland was launched in July 2016. I cannot remember the page number, but halfway through there was a section on disability. My analysis of it has been echoed by Mr. Cunningham, if I am interpreting his comments correctly. Rebuilding Ireland was strong on processes, with this and that committee feeding into one another. However, all I could see was officials putting documents in a wheelbarrow and taking them to one committee and then to a subcommittee of same. Rebuilding Ireland was weak on what it was going to do. The evidence to date has shown that not much has happened for people with disabilities in the past three years. I was amazed that it did not even mention the number of people with disabilities - I believe it was 3,919 - enumerated in the local authorities' 2013 surveys of who was seeking housing. To me, this looked like an attempt to solve the macro problem of housing and homelessness while avoiding dealing with people whom we know have had issues with housing for generations. I would be interested in the witnesses' comments on this point.

Are we making progress? If someone is earning the exact same amount that he or she earned five years ago, we cannot credibly tell that person that his or her income has not dropped. Even if we did not include the issue of housing, the cost of living has increased. There will be press releases about further investment of 10% or 15% on last year's amount for this, that and the other, but what is the witnesses' assessment? Are we draining the swamp or are we falling back even if more funding is being provided? I am thinking about the demographics, unmet needs and so on.

Vice Chairman: The Deputy should ask his final question.

Senator John Dolan: I will conclude on the grant waiting lists. Marvellous things have happened in the past ten or 20 years in terms of kids being able to attend regular schools and being educated with their brothers and sisters, but most adaptation grant applications are from families that are trying to kick off family formation, pay high mortgages and rents, etc. They are living in houses that are not adapted and do not have significant capacity to be easily adapted. That is a fact of life. As such, families join the waiting list but the income criteria and so on make it virtually impossible for such families to have houses in which their children can live and operate. That is a vignette.

Regarding decongregation, there are a further 1,300-plus young people, that is, under 65 years of age, in nursing homes. The HSE has accepted that some of them should not be there. None of them should be, given that nursing homes are designed for people who, on average, are 80 years of age plus and who live just two years of their lives there. Someone aged 60, 50, 40 or 30 years could be put in one of those homes. What is being done to maximise independent living?

I thank the committee members for their work on this matter.

Vice Chairman: I call Ms Barron.

Ms Siobhán Barron: I apologise, as I meant to respond to the question on the grant scheme waiting list. Clearly, there are issues with it. Some of them are down to how agencies line up services, for example, lining up occupational therapists with the system. Sometimes, it is about the level of understanding about disability and the different types of disability and need. We do not deal with information queries, but they sometimes come our way. We hear about cases where, for example, a child has autism and the housing authority has made a decision that does not understand the situation for the family or the child. Instead, it is very black and white. We produced some guidelines on autism, but they must be embedded in the system. The processes and decisions to support that embedding must be examined.

Another issue is the level of grant available. Senator Dolan referred to the cost of living. The cost of making adaptations has increased, particularly where the building of extensions is concerned. Since the alternative costs are significantly higher, it would make more sense to review the level of the grant. The timeframe involved should also be reviewed, as costs arise over an extended timeframe. If a universal design approach could be applied under the grant scheme to the standards the works must achieve, it would have long-term benefits. Where a local authority is undertaking upgrading works and repairs in various buildings, it should always apply a standard of universal design. There might not be an immediate need in those properties, but it may become a need further down the road.

There is a need to identify and agree an increase in the availability of social housing for persons with disabilities. As to whether there have been improvements under the national housing strategy, some good foundations are being put in place by way of practical guidelines and structures, but what is required is the next level, namely, the implementation of actions, the setting of targets, and accountability for the delivery of same. Given that the housing strategy is coming to an end next year and the mid-term review is under way, there is an opportunity to look for something more concrete and ambitious. It fits within the ambit of the existing strategies but there is something to deliver on the ground in that regard.

The Senator also asked about persons with disabilities in nursing homes who should not be there. We are very aware of that. It has to be factored in, particularly in respect of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities but also in terms of their right to be part of the community and live full lives. Within the next year, Ireland will be due to report on how it is progressing actions in respect of the UN convention and Article 19 is very much about independent living. These are the issues on which progress will have to be demonstrated.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: On the grants scheme, I have a copy of the pre-budget submission that the Irish Wheelchair Association submitted for this year. One item relates directly to the housing adaptation grant. I just noticed yesterday that the fourth report on the implementation of the national housing strategy for people with disabilities cites expenditure on the grants as €60 million. While that sounds enormous, it actually averaged out at about €6,000 per person. A practical example of that is when the needs of one of our own tenants changed. She had a profound physical disability and applied for the grant because she needed an extra bedroom built onto a small, one bedroom house. After tendering and going out for a number of prices, the cost to complete the extension - an en suite bedroom and a bit of reconfiguration - was €63,000. The maximum grant was €30,000. Fortunately in that case, the person contributed the other €30,000 which luckily came to her at that point in time. That is my understanding. Otherwise, it would not have gone ahead. That is a typical example.

The grant is a figure that somebody set and stood back from. It does not deal with the reality of life, the economy or the increasing costs that have been referred to again and again. It is wonderful for the small adaptations in a house but for more substantial work, there needs to be serious consideration given to it. The flexibility should be given to the local authorities to deal with it. Expenditure is needed and the grant creates savings elsewhere. These adaptations cut back on the requirement for personal assistance if someone has a house that meets their needs. For example, someone could have a ceiling tracking hoist which would mean they would only need one personal assistant, PA, to support them as opposed to two. It is a complex set-up. It is a figures game but somebody has just turned the other way and is not looking at it. How long are we going to continue with expenditure of €60 million on the housing adaptation grant and not build houses that are wheelchair accessible in the first place? A high degree of universal design could allow for simple adaptations over time. If we look at sustainable communities, if we do some long-term planning and design these houses to a degree of specification, over time we will be reducing the requirement for the housing adaptation grant.

I was asked about what Departments come into play. The obvious one is the Department of Health in terms of the funding of PAs and the protocols and all that. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform holds the purse strings. Everyone needs to talk and realise there are verified costs here so that it is not a battle every time we go back to something. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport was referred to earlier. Going back to our pre-budget submission, personal assistants, housing and transport are obvious ones and I am sure there are others we can bring into the loop.

The Senator referred to 1,300 people inappropriately placed in nursing homes. I referred to that earlier. I would be encouraging that the unmet need for housing be recorded in order that we get a full picture. Some local authorities are resisting a call from people to register their housing need to plan for the next five years or whatever, because they have such numbers as they are they do not want it to grow. The Government does not want to see the numbers grow, it wants to see them coming down. There is a lot of need there, including among people in nursing homes. Many others are sleeping on couches or living in family homes with siblings,

elderly parents and so on. It is only a snapshot of a bigger number. Going back to the housing design issue, there is room for creativity in terms of the models of housing. There are many models that could lie in between that of a two-bed house with one person living in it with their PA, and that of a nursing home with 50 or 100 bedrooms. For example, we could have two houses sharing a PA room so they can share the one PA at night on whom they can call. There could be three or four houses sharing a PA room. Instead of four separate PAs in four separate locations, or a nursing home, there could be a facility designed and funded and provided with assistive technology, which we have not mentioned today. A short-term outlay would have long-term savings for the Exchequer. There is a lot of creativity that can be brought into that loop to bring people out of nursing homes into set-ups that support them socially, emotionally and physically within a nice environment.

Deputy Mick Barry: I have two questions. The first is about decongregation. The 2019 target is not going to be met. What is our guests' take on how that is likely to pan out? Is it a very short delay or is it going to be more significant? What are the implications?

Ms Siobhán Barron: I am not sure I can be clearer on when decongregation will happen. Certainly there are a number of thousand people yet to be moved into the community. When they talk about decongregation it is looking at residential centres of ten persons or more. They have invested in an accelerated programme for a number of sites and there are a few hundred people from those sites who are yet to be moved out. That had a specific investment programme to support it.

I might come back on the other question about the Departments now as I did not answer it earlier. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is critical. The focus in all Government Departments now is on financial sustainability. Universal design provides a financially sustainable approach to housing across the board. The whole area of housing in the community is about the development of the community as a whole, so the Departments with responsibility for community development have a key role. I would include the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in the context of supporting families, what happens in the community and holding units together. There are many Departments with this in their remit. Living in the community, good living arrangements and so on are also relevant. I suspect that many Departments and agencies are involved to some degree. Disability is part of everybody's agenda. On living in the community, having access to a home and what that means even in terms of getting access to employment, for example, having a fixed address, they would all have relevant roles.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I was just consulting my colleague, Ms Carthy. The Department of Justice and Equality may be another one in respect of discrimination. Congregated settings, as stated earlier, are not an area we are overly involved in but I do meet representatives at some of the disability steering groups. One of the common issues is the supply of housing. I was at a meeting recently where figures were presented for the needs in that county under the headings of physical, sensory, intellectual and mental health. We pointed out that physical disability is the biggest area of need. Many people with physical disabilities do not require wheelchair accessible housing, while many people with intellectual disabilities do require it. Some analysis must be done there. That brings us back to our question of whether people require wheelchair accessible housing. The reality is that the housing is not designed or built and is not, therefore, available in sustainable communities around the country in order for people to decongregate from settings, family homes, nursing homes or homeless couches.

Deputy Mick Barry: My second question relates to mandatory standards. Are mandatory standards the norm in the European Union or in a majority of EU states? Based on the research

that has been done, what is the difference in real terms - in facts and figures, but also in people's lives - between a country with mandatory standards being implemented and the current position here? Could the witnesses give us some insight into that?

Ms Siobhán Barron: Standards can often be voluntary, whereas regulations are mandatory. There are different approaches to this and there is often a minimum degree of accessibility built into those regulations as well. Standards can push beyond the limits of regulation to a higher standard. We are not seeing universal design at a high level of accessibility being factored into many countries. However, we have been progressing in other areas, particularly in the design of goods, services and products. We have been working with EU standard bodies and the ISO on standards and we are starting to see a buy-in to a universal design focus generally in manufacturing and goods. A standard was launched in recent weeks which promotes and rewards anyone who signs up to a standard on universal design in producing goods and services. We are starting to see support for universal design at international level, which is a helpful opening for adoption at local level. Our role in the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design is to promote the adoption of standards by different bodies, voluntary and non-voluntary, and we engage with that proactively. We often develop practical guidelines to support the implementation of those standards. We have worked with the tourism sector, for example, and have developed a suite of guidelines called Building for Everyone: A Universal Design Approach. We have designed universal design homes. We have also developed a set of guidelines for homes for people with dementia in order that they can continue to live in their own homes. Again, those are voluntary standards.

Vice Chairman: Does Mr. Cunningham wish to contribute?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Yes. I acknowledge the standards of the NDA and the different levels there. I also acknowledge the standards and guidelines of occupational therapists and I present the Irish Wheelchair Association's best practice standards. I emphasise, based on 60 years of experience that we are, as Deputy Ó Broin said, a very practical organisation grounded in the experiences of people with disabilities. Our standards are all required in order for someone to live independently, but they are only standards. Part M only allows people to visit houses but not live in them. In practice, that means someone can get into the house where possible, access the downstairs living room and the Part M toilet, which a person in a wheelchair may not fit into depending on the size of the chair. God forbid someone would want to stay in that house or live in it, because Part M does not provide for that. The UK building regulations have different levels of regulation, including wheelchair accessible housing. Standards, as Ms Barron said, are not mandatory, which is the reason they need a complete overhaul. Do we have to wait for that or do we get the Department to fast-track an agreed specification for wheelchair accessible housing, for instance? There is a great deal in place, including the standards, the paperwork and the intent, but the obligation to deliver on them is lacking.

Deputy Mick Barry: Does the UK have a high standard?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I cannot answer that as I do not know.

Dr. Gerald Craddock: The standard used in the UK is BS 8300. As others have noted, standards are voluntary but BS 8300 is used in the revised Part M 2018 in the UK, to which Mr. Cunningham referred. That revised Part M refers to three levels of housing: standard, lifetime adaptable and wheelchair. That is compatible with the three levels we have built in to our universal design home guidelines. Our home guidelines would be above both the UK standard and the new Part M in the UK. A standard has been developed and many developers and agencies

use the BS 8300 as a reference. However, as learned colleagues have noted, the regulation is the mandatory part. We all agree that needs to be updated and the level currently in place needs to be improved. As Mr. Cunningham has highlighted, it is currently more about visibility, rather than actually living in the homes.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: Did Deputy Barry ask about the gold standard in the EU or here?

Deputy Mick Barry: The UK had been instanced as a jurisdiction with higher standards than here. I was wondering if the UK had the best practice or if other EU countries had gone further.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I thought the Deputy referred to the EU.

Dr. Gerald Craddock: A new standard is being developed in which we are heavily involved. However, it will be 2021 or 2022 before that is agreed. It will address not only housing but buildings in general. The National Standards Authority has a mirror committee as part of the wider consultation with key constituents in Ireland. The Irish Wheelchair Association sits on the committee which examines better, more accessible building, including housing. The European standard is some way down the road.

Vice Chairman: I will make a few comments before we conclude. Senator Murnane O'Connor asked whether having someone with a disability on a board or on different organisations would make a difference. It does make a difference and I have examples of it. We were lucky to elect our first councillor with a disability, Ms Miriam Murphy, in Wicklow in 2014.

Senator John Dolan: She is a grand lady.

Vice Chairman: One would listen to Miriam anyway, that is for sure. Her email handle is "murphyinmotion".

I also recall my mother's experience in having to retrofit her 1960s house. There is no point denying that the combination of living with and working closely with someone with a disability changes one's mindset and how one thinks, because it does. Ms Murphy had a huge role to play when she sat on the board of Wicklow County Tourism. She brought a disabled perspective to the whole tourism industry in Wicklow and it is now feeding down into our tourism plan, which considers people with disabilities. My mother is very proud of the home she lives in. She now has to negotiate a wheelchair through narrow doors which is causing the paint to come off. I know this is upsetting her but she will not show it. Those are practical things and when one lives through them, it makes a difference in how one thinks. I want to put that on record because people who do not live with these things do not routinely think of them.

As the owner of an old hotel built in the 1820s, which I have extended, I know the difference between trying to retrofit something and designing with disability in mind. One accessible toilet could be put in the 1800s building or ten could put in for the same cost when designing with a new build in mind. There was a figure of approximately €4,500 to try to put into the design of a house some features that would make it more livable for a person with a disability. What percentage of our housing stock has had to be adapted overall? Would the €4,500 be an extra burden or would it amount to a long-term saving in the context of the housing stock? There are no two ways about it because designing a new build with these features makes the process much easier and cheaper, ultimately delivering a better result.

Mr. Cunningham stated that we should design 7% of our housing stock for people with

disabilities and Ms Barron indicated that nearly 13% of people on lower incomes or the social housing list have such needs. The private sector proportion is 8%. Is the 7% figure too low? Should we aim for a higher percentage?

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I was referring specifically to wheelchair users as opposed to people with disabilities.

Vice Chairman: That is fine..

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We had a session a couple of weeks back on retrofitting. The Tipperary Energy Agency said that to simplify and improve access to retrofitting funds, there is a blended model of grant aid and long-term low interest Government-backed loans. We are talking about the same set of problems. Although there are grants for private homeowners, they are difficult to access if a person does not have the matching funds. It may be worthwhile, in the context of the report, to look at making the same argument for a blended funding model to make it easier to access adaptation grants coupled with long-term low interest loans where the household does not have the means. We heard mention of a person with €30,000. Perhaps it is something we can work in as a recommendation.

Ms Siobhán Barron: On the cost relating to a universally designed home, there is only anecdotal evidence so far but we will do a cost-benefit analysis and we hope to have further information within the next 12 months. Sustainability is the added value in that housing and it is not just about physical cost and savings in the context of retrofitting. We are doing much work with the agencies dealing with the environment, including the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, on the matter. Much can be advanced in that way.

Mr. Tony Cunningham: I thank the committee for affording us the opportunity to come before it. I reiterate our invitation to members to visit people and get first-hand experience.

Senator John Dolan: The Vice Chairman mentioned engagement of people with disabilities at different fora, including committees. He also mentioned Councillor Miriam Murphy, who came back with an enhanced vote, which is good news. That is important. When the transport report was written, it was published with evidence and quotes from people with disabilities. They were lived experiences. Would it be possible to have a session with some people with disabilities some day? I know the logistics involved with setting up committee meetings but they could set out the impact of these issues. We could have the testimony of a parent or something like that. It would really enrich the report and drive home the point so well made by our guests.

The National Disability Authority indicated that we must be ready to make the first report to the UN disability committee next year. The report we will compile will be really important in that regard because it will demonstrate that the committee takes seriously the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its articles relating to housing and community.

Ms Siobhán Barron: On retrofitting, the UK has carried out a study in respect of its housing stock and discovered that 50% of houses are not adaptable. It would cost over £15,000 each to upgrade half of the remaining 50%. That is something interesting to add to the discussion.

Vice Chairman: We appreciate the engagement of our guests. It will feed into our report, which will complement our universal living report from last year. I thank all of our guests for attending and engaging with the committee.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.45 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 10 July 2019.