

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM THITHÍOCHT, PLEANÁIL AGUS RIALTAS ÁITIÚIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, PLANNING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Déardaoin, 12 Nollaig 2019

Thursday, 12 December 2019

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Mick Barry,	Martin Conway,
Pat Casey,	Colette Kelleher,
Mattie McGrath,	Jennifer Murnane O'Connor.
Darragh O'Brien,	
Eoin Ó Broin.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett.

Teachta / Deputy Noel Rock sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: As we have a quorum, we will commence in public session. Apologies have been received from Deputy Fergus O'Dowd and Senator Victor Boyhan. I propose that we go into private session to deal with some housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 9.34 a.m. and resumed in public session at 9.44 a.m.

Update on Rebuilding Ireland: Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government

Chairman: At the request of the broadcasting and recording services, members and visitors in the Public Gallery are requested 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 put phones on silent mode, as this will maintain the same level of interference with the broadcasting system. Today, we will be receiving a quarterly update on Rebuilding Ireland. I welcome to the meeting the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, and officials from his Department.

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

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 call the Minister to make his opening statement.

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I thank the Chairman and members for the opportunity to appear before them again to give an update on the progress made in the implementation of Rebuilding Ireland. I am joined today by Mr. John McCarthy, Secretary General, and assistant secretaries, Ms Maria Graham, Ms Mary Hurley and Mr. Paul Lemass.

At the core of Rebuilding Ireland is the supply of new homes for individuals and families of all incomes, built in the right locations and with access to services. Tangible progress is being made in this area. For the first time this decade, new dwelling completions over a 12-month period have exceeded 20,000. When Rebuilding Ireland was launched in 2016, the total was less

than 10,000. Good progress is being made in the delivery of social housing as well. In 2014, only 419 social housing homes were built, and this year we will build more than 6,000. This year, 27,360 housing supports will be delivered to those who need help securing a home. Most critically, this progress is sustainable. The measures that have been put in place to accelerate delivery and increase supply are solid and evidence-based, creating confidence for the house building sector across the public and private sectors. When we talk about targets, whether for social or affordable homes or for overall supply, we need ambition to make the targets high and challenging, and determination to drive forward and achieve them. Rebuilding Ireland set plenty of targets, and year on year, we are rising to the challenge. Some are more difficult to achieve than others but we have always committed to full transparency on delivery, which is why I welcome the opportunity to address the committee.

Some commentators on homelessness, whether experts or otherwise, suggest that nothing is being done and that our policy is failing completely. That is untrue and is unfair to the hundreds of local authority staff and our partners in the NGO sector, who are working on the front lines up and down this country doing their utmost to assist vulnerable households. There are myriad personal, situational and financial reasons for homelessness. It is a complex issue. Resolving homelessness continues to be a key priority for my Department. There are still too many people in emergency accommodation and my Department is working closely with the local authorities to ensure we can provide homes for each of the individuals and households experiencing homelessness. While the numbers clearly demonstrate the scale of the challenge we face, the most recent homelessness performance reports submitted to my Department by the local authorities show that we are making progress. In the first nine months of the year, 4,389 adults and their associated dependants exited homelessness to a home. This is an increase of 17% in comparison to the same period in 2018. The increasing delivery of social homes under Rebuilding Ireland has resulted in increased exits to local authority homes, with 873 exits this year, which is an increase of 69% on the same period last year. There were also 691 exits to approved housing body, AHB, homes, up 46% on the same period in 2018. Data provided by the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive, DRHE, also show increased exits of families from emergency accommodation to homes in the Dublin region. In the first nine months of the year, 786 families exited from emergency accommodation in Dublin to a home. This was an increase of almost 50% on the family exits over the same period in 2018. We will continue to work hard to deliver homes for all families in emergency accommodation.

As we work with the local authorities to increase exits from homelessness, we are also committed to ensuring the individuals and families experiencing homelessness receive the supports they need to move to a home, working in partnership with our colleagues across Departments and agencies. We are continuing to roll out family hubs to provide more appropriate emergency accommodation for families and to reduce the time spent in emergency accommodation through the provision of on-site supports. There are now 30 family hubs in Ireland, providing accommodation for approximately 690 families. These are not permanent solutions to the homelessness crisis, but they reflect the need to provide suitable accommodation to vulnerable families until a permanent solution is delivered. We are also introducing new beds for single adults to ensure shelter for everyone who requires it. A new outreach team began work in Dublin earlier this year and is working intensively with rough sleepers to encourage them to avail of shelter and supports. These efforts are reducing the levels of rough sleeping in Dublin. The winter rough sleeper count conducted at the end of November recorded 92 individuals, which is the lowest number since 2015. There was surplus capacity of beds in the system on the night of the count and the DRHE and its service delivery partners will continue to work with these individuals to encourage them to avail of shelter.

The cornerstone of our policy for rough sleepers will continue to be the Housing First programme. Housing First is being rolled out nationally and will provide housing and health supports to rough sleepers and long-term users of emergency accommodation with complex health needs. Housing First will allow us to eliminate rough sleeping in many areas of the country. For example, Waterford city has informed my Department that Housing First has reduced the number of people sleeping rough in Waterford from 20 to three this month.

I am sorry, I can hear Deputy Boyd Barrett talking.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I apologise.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: In terms of social housing delivery, we are continuing to build on the significant progress made between 2016 and 2018 in terms of supporting new households into homes. As of the third quarter of 2019, more than 90,000 additional households across Ireland have received social housing support under Rebuilding Ireland. Looking at this in another way, when we set out with the plan, there were 92,000 households on local authority waiting lists. By the middle of the fourth year of the plan, an equivalent number of households have been assisted.

Of course, we always knew that the number in need of social housing was not a static number and that additional demand would likely arise as our population grows. That is why we planned to deliver almost 140,000 social homes overall. We are on track not only to deliver that number, but most likely to exceed it. Building on a strong pace of delivery in 2018, in the first nine months of this year, just under 18,000 families and individuals were helped into a social housing support across Ireland. This includes almost 4,400 additional social homes provided by local authorities and approved housing bodies under build, acquisition and leasing programmes and a further 13,600 households accommodated under the housing assistance payment, HAP, and the rental accommodation scheme, RAS. This is having an impact. The social housing waiting list has reduced by over 25%, or 22,907 households, compared with the assessment conducted in September 2016.

I stated earlier that creating additional supply is at the core of a successful action plan. Our attention in terms of social housing delivery continues to be firmly placed on accelerating new builds. My Department is in constant contact with local authorities and approved housing bodies to achieve maximum output in this regard. This year we have held a housing summit with local authority chief executives and seven regional events with local authority housing delivery teams. I met with all chief executives again in September in respect of delivery matters following our last committee update.

Last year, while delivering 6% above the overall target, we achieved 97% of the national target for new build activity. It is important to note that this progress has been delivered by a local authority sector which had effectively built no new social homes during the worst years of the financial crisis and which had been stripped of necessary expertise. This year's targets are even higher. Delivering well against those ambitions is important. The targets are deliberately high because the local authority sector, my Department and I understand the urgency and extent of the challenge. The Department and I have provided the necessary resources to allow the local authority sector to deliver. I have been clear with local authorities that risks of slippage, delay and non-delivery must be mitigated. Projects need to secure early agreement at council and must come forward to my Department for approval on a continuous basis and get on site without delay. Crucially, projects must be carefully managed to completion so we can deliver the homes people need.

Delivery of homes is a complex issue and local authorities need expertise and support. That is why I have agreed with the County and City Managers Association that the housing delivery office, initially launched within my Department, should transition to the Local Government Management Agency, LGMA, to become a resource embedded in the sector dedicated to supporting local authorities achieve maximum potential. Local authorities have also increased staffing numbers in their housing departments to deliver on increased demands. Since 2016, an additional 764 posts have been sanctioned by my Department including 217 in this year alone. There are now almost 3,800 people working to deliver homes in our city and county councils.

Our social housing delivery in 2020 will be aided by the completion of the first homes under the social housing public private partnership programme. Homes in the first bundle of sites will begin to become available from the second quarter, at locations such as Dunleer in County Louth and Naas in County Kildare. Just last month, we signed the contract for the second bundle of eight sites under this programme. Construction has already commenced on these additional 465 homes across counties Cork, Clare, Galway, Kildare, Roscommon and Waterford. Under this model of delivery, a private partner designs, builds and manages each social housing development for 25 years; the land remains with the relevant local authority and all the homes revert to council ownership at the end of the contract.

In the 12 months to the end of September 2019, 23,554 new homes became available for use, an increase of 15% on the previous 12 months. Taking account of leading indicators of activity, such as commencement notices and planning permissions, as well as data on economic activity in the residential sector, we remain on track to reach our targets. The latest data for the number of new homes granted planning permission are also very encouraging. In the year to the end of June 2019, permission was granted for almost 32,000 new homes. In addition, our fast-track planning process is working well. Last week, I signed an order extending the strategic housing development arrangements until the end of 2021, and my officials are working on legislation to implement a use it or lose it provision, under which planning permission will lapse if substantial construction works do not get under way within 18 months of permission being granted. To date, 20,242 houses and apartments and 7,890 student bed spaces have been approved under this process.

The Government is committed to ensuring that the new homes are more accessible and affordable. The target is for the delivery of at least 10,000 affordable homes to buy or rent via local authorities over the medium term. Affordable homes to buy or rent are aimed specifically at lower to middle-income earners who are first-time buyers. In terms of more affordable purchase properties being made available, the primary legislation has been enacted and the arrangements for the affordable dwelling purchase scheme are currently being drafted. To date, I have approved 23 local authority schemes of priority and my Department is working with the remaining local authorities to bring this process to conclusion.

Importantly, new measures introduced under Rebuilding Ireland, including the €310 million serviced sites fund, SSF, are specifically targeted at supporting local authorities to deliver more affordable homes. Thus far I have approved funding of €127 million overall to enable the delivery of almost 3,200 affordable homes for purchase under the scheme across 14 local authority areas. I expect infrastructure works on these projects to begin as soon as possible and delivery of affordable homes from next year onwards. I am glad to say that one of the first sites that is benefitting from SSF investment is at Enniskerry Road in Dublin, where it is supporting the development of 50 homes under a cost-rental model. Builders went on site in this project in August and I have seen for myself that good progress is being made. The grant support

provided by Government, combined with the co-operation of many organisations, means that homes in Enniskerry Road will be made available at significantly below market prices for the area. Lessons learned from this development and other pathfinder cost-rental pilot sites will inform the future development of cost rental in Ireland.

More recently, the sod was turned on the second SSF scheme, and the first that will deliver affordable homes to purchase, at Boherboy, Mayfield, Cork city, where 116 new energy-efficient two and three-bedroom homes will be delivered in five phases. The first phase will be delivered next year and homes will range in price from €198,000 to €223,000. It should be noted that, in addition to new homes being made available under the terms of the affordable purchase scheme and cost rental at prices which represent a significant discount on market norms, households have also been supported through other key Government affordability initiatives. These include the Rebuilding Ireland home loan and the help-to-buy scheme which have helped address the housing needs of more than 16,500 households.

I would also like to take this opportunity to inform the committee of progress with regard to legislative developments in this sphere. The Housing (Regulation of Approved Housing Bodies) Bill 2019 was passed by the Dáil last week and is progressing through the Seanad. I acknowledge the positive and co-operative engagement from members of this committee with this important legislation. It will strengthen governance and the financial viability of the approved housing body sector. It will safeguard the significant public investment being made in the delivery of social housing by approved housing bodies and provide assurance to tenants, the public and potential investors that the sector is well regulated.

With regard to the rental sector, the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 was passed earlier this year. The majority of provisions have come into operation, with the remaining provisions requiring the annual registration of tenancies to commence in early 2020. Following commencement of the relevant provisions, on the 4 June 2019, I designated a further 21 new local electoral areas across 12 counties using the revised rent pressure zone, RPZ, criteria. With these designations, an estimated 68.4% of tenancies are now in RPZs. It should be noted that it is my intention to advance a second rental Bill shortly, which will further enhance tenancies protections, including in the context of receivership situations.

In terms of Brexit, like all public bodies, my Department will continue to work with our partners across Government and the wider sector to ensure that the necessary arrangements will be in place to deal with issues that may arise. As I mentioned in my last engagement with the committee, we have been working with the construction sector, particularly in the area of construction products and the need to have notified bodies located in the European Union for products that are subject to construction products regulation. We will continue our preparations and work with the key stakeholders on issues arising in terms of housing provision and delivery in the context of Brexit.

I thank the committee for the invitation today. I will, of course, be happy to address any questions that members may have.

Chairman: I normally invite members to indicate if they wish to contribute but, as every member has indicated, I will take them in the order in which they indicated. We will start with Senator Kelleher, followed by Deputy Darragh O'Brien.

Senator Colette Kelleher: I thank the Minister and his officials. I note that, in his address, the Minister challenges people who say that nothing is being done. People know that work is

being done. The challenge relates to whether enough is being done. Are the right actions being taken and the right policy implemented? I worked for Cork Simon Community for eight years. I was recently in touch with the organisation and it is working flat out. It is one of the NGOs working with the Minister and it is working extremely hard. It only receives 50% of its funding from the State. It works night and day, as do local authorities around the country. The critiques are concerned with whether the Government's response to the scale of the crisis is inadequate. People wonder whether the right actions are being taken and being prioritised correctly.

My questions relate to pillar 1 and tackling homelessness. I am particularly concerned with one group included in those figures - children. I do not believe the Minister specifically mentioned children living in emergency accommodation. An estimated 3,800 children, and possibly more, are living in emergency accommodation. Last month, there were an unprecedented two Oireachtas joint committee reports presented on the same day. I have copies of them. One was compiled by this committee and the other by the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs. This committee's report made 14 recommendations and the other report made 20. Is the Minister planning to act on all, or any, of the recommendations in these two reports within the terms of reference of Rebuilding Ireland or other recommendations or measures available to him? That is not clear from his statement. The recommendations were strong and clear, and I would like to hear from him his plans in this regard.

Does he accept the detrimental effects and the adverse childhood experiences associated with living in homelessness? A total of 70% of people whom Cork Simon Community has supported have experienced these adverse early childhood experiences. The group we are neglecting today is the group that will be homeless tomorrow. This is not just a blight on people's lives but also, ultimately, a cost to the State in the responses we must make. Does the Minister accept that even more children in Ireland are living in cold and unhealthy environments? Does he also accept the findings of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, SVP, report published earlier this week that a staggering 140,000 children are growing up in the cold and that 12.3% of children are living in fuel poverty, prone to ill-health and illnesses that go with living in such conditions? This report revealed that one in five one-parent families live in substandard accommodation and 11% are in arrears with utility bills. The impact of homelessness and inadequate housing on children's health was spelled out by the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, RCPI, in another important report published in November. The SVP's Growing Up in the Cold and the RCPI's report are in line with a smaller but important study, Born and Raised into Homelessness, Overcrowding and Substandard Housing, undertaken by Young Knocknaheeny, a highly successful project based on Cork's north side and promoting infant mental health but whose work is undermined at every hand's turn by the fact that families are living in substandard, unsafe, unsanitary and unhealthy living conditions.

Landlords are receiving housing assistance payment, HAP, money from the State for quite frankly slum conditions. One of the reports cites the case of a family with a child with special needs living in a HAP apartment in which all three family members slept on sofas in the living area due to a large leak from the main bedroom window. We, as a State, are giving this landlord money. The second bedroom was damp and the storage heater did not work. They were heating the apartment with a tumble dryer. The child living there was under three years of age, had additional needs and was being supported by a physiotherapist and a speech and language therapist. They could not help that much, however, because of the state of the living conditions.

Returning to the two Oireachtas joint committee reports on child homelessness, what is the Minister going to do about the recommendations? Is he heeding what fellow Oireachtas

Members have recommended, what doctors have recommended and what front-line workers are telling him? Will he at the very least end the practice of one-night-only emergency accommodation, which is so very harmful to children?

I ask him to think about this. What kind of effect does he think a night-to-night existence would have had on him when he was a boy? I ask him to think about his anxiety levels and about getting to school, doing homework, playing and making friends while going from night to night and from place to place. How would he eat properly? How would he begin to have a decent life? As this committee recommended, will he cease the provision of one-night-only accommodation?

Under pillar 1, Rebuilding Ireland commits to appointing dedicated child support workers for children experiencing homelessness. We know from organisations working on the ground that child support workers are hugely important to the 4,000 homeless children. The Ombudsman for Children made the same finding, and the RCPI report stated the same. It also found that 40% of children in homelessness accommodation have clinically significant developmental, emotional and behavioural problems. I have also heard anecdotally - I want to get to the bottom of this - that children living in emergency accommodation are not getting their vaccines because of certain issues. I do not have the full facts on that but I will come back to it. We are letting children down.

In summary, my questions relate to ending the practice at least of one-night-only accommodation; getting the child support workers to children; and how the Minister will respond to the reports from this committee, the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, the RCPI the SVDP and others.

Chairman: I thank the Senator. She may ask further questions on the second round of questioning if she so wishes.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank the Senator for her questions. Of course, we are letting children down. If any child is in emergency accommodation, the State is letting that child down. In my opening statement I mentioned families, but we report on children in emergency accommodation every month. Thankfully, the number was down in October, but not by nearly enough. We also have the new quarterly reporting. I have met many children in emergency accommodation. I have met them with their parents. I have met the families transitioning from hotels into hubs, the families going straight into hubs and the families coming out of hubs and going into homes. At every stage of this process, I get to meet families in crisis and housing insecurity, and it is very difficult for children in these circumstances. One of the first conversations I had as Minister, which I have related a few times, was about the impact being discovered. That was two and a half years ago. While the research from the physicians is welcome, it is not necessarily new information. Two and a half years ago, some of the leaders in this area were talking about the impact on children's motor neurone skills because of the types of accommodation in which they were growing up, and that is very serious. That is a big part of the reason the hub model was developed. I am sure the Senator has had an opportunity to visit family hubs and has been able to see-----

Senator Colette Kelleher: They are not good enough.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I dispute that completely because, compared with a hotel, a family hub is far superior in terms of the additional space and the wrap-around supports, the Tusla workers, the supports-----

Senator Colette Kelleher: They are not homes.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Of course, they are not homes. No one is saying they are. They are the first response. They should be the only first response. We should not be using hotels but, unfortunately, we still are. In a hub, however, there are the wrap-around supports, the supports for the parents, which are important, play spaces and homework clubs. Most important, children in hubs spend far less time in emergency accommodation than children in hotels. The average stay is six months. They should not be there at all, but with the hub programme, we have been able to reduce the time families spend in emergency accommodation and to find sustainable pathways out of homelessness. This is not about quick fixes; it is about getting people into their forever homes. That is what we do with the hub programme. Is what we are doing enough? No. It will not be enough until we have built enough homes. That is why we talk about supply all the time and catching up with the current demand.

The matter of funding for NGOs is interesting. Many people do not realise that many of the large NGOs get more funding from the State than from voluntary contributions. This is because of the emphasis and the importance we as an Oireachtas and a Government place on getting people out of emergency accommodation. This is seen in our spend on housing, which this year is the highest on record, and in the fact that we now have a Department dedicated to housing. That was not just a rebranding; the environment function left the Department and went into the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. It is also seen in the number of new homes now being built, including by local authorities, and the number of people being prevented from going into homelessness. It is important that they never have the experience of the children the Senator mentioned and the children I have met. We are also seeing results in the numbers for that other element of homelessness, rough sleeping.

The Senator referred to a number of reports. A number of very good reports with a number of recommendations are being done. I met the Ombudsman for Children to talk through the recommendations in one of the more recent reports in the past few months to see how we could ensure that our understanding of the recommendations was the same as the ombudsman's for when we go to implement them. My officials recently appeared before the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs to talk about the recommendations in that report. We are still reviewing some of them. Measures such as the quality standards framework are now being rolled out nationally. We have talked about an inspections regime. Once we have the quality standards framework in place-----

Senator Colette Kelleher: Is this for hubs?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Yes but-----

Senator Colette Kelleher: We should not have hubs in the first place, though. While they are better than-----

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Unless the Senator can tell me where these families would be, other than on the streets, I do not know what to say to her. We must have some sort of accommodation until we get homes. This is why people criticise HAP; I criticise it myself. We should not have to depend on it to the extent we do, but practically no homes were being built. Until we get enough homes built, we must care for people in some form of accommodation. It will not be perfect-----

Senator Colette Kelleher: Is that not the nub of the failure?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Yes, and it is a failure of the past, not the present.

Senator Colette Kelleher: It is a failure of the past and the present.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Some 23,000 new homes became available in the 12-month period up to quarter 3 of this year. The figure was under 10,000 before Rebuilding Ireland, so the programme is increasing supply. We must continue to increase supply. As I said, it is not yet enough.

As for children or families who might be experiencing fuel poverty, half the social housing stock has been retrofitted since 2014. We have more work to do on retrofitting the social housing stock. A number of different supports are available through the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection for families who have difficulty paying bills. Housing assistance payment, HAP, households have to be inspected as part of the HAP agreement to ensure they are up to standard. That is different from the private rental sector, although we are increasing inspections in that sector.

With regard to the one night only accommodation, that is not policy. However, we must have a contingency for when a family might appear at the last minute. We have to put them somewhere for the night so they are safe and not on the streets. The next day we get them into something more permanent. It is important that there is a contingency in place for that situation, but it is not policy to have one night only accommodation. The policy is hubs. The number of self-accommodating is down, which is good, and we have key workers in place for families who are struggling. From speaking to some of the people working on the front line, it seems that some families who have come into emergency accommodation have difficulties that are not just about meeting the rent or finding a place to live. Unfortunately, they are deeper than that and the families require more help and support to get them sustainably out of homelessness. That work is taking place with those families.

The important thing is to have a joined-up approach across the Government. One of the things I implemented when I was appointed Minister was an inter-agency group across the Government to ensure we have that joined-up approach. In the case of Housing First, we make sure it has the support of the Department of Health. When we are putting a new detoxification facility for Dublin Simon on Usher's Island, it too has the support of the Department of Health. When we are dealing with families who are not aware of their status to remain, we deal with the Department of Justice and Equality. When I am talking to the Ombudsman for Children, we talk about Tusla. It is a whole-of-government approach.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The target for new home completions under Rebuilding Ireland is 25,000 units per annum. The Minister said he will exceed 20,000. What figure will he reach this year for new home completions? Will he confirm that the target in Rebuilding Ireland is 25,000?

Senator Kelleher made a number of valid points regarding family hubs. Unfortunately, they have become a necessity. The Minister asked where families would go if there were no hubs. They should go to houses and to permanent solutions for them. How many additional hubs have been planned by the Department or is it planning to develop and fund more hubs?

Bringing existing social housing stock back into use is not mentioned in the Minister's statement. How many homes were brought back into use in the last quarter of this year since September? The Minister might not have the figure. With regard to Dublin City Council, is he

aware that no funding was provided for voids since the start of September last and will not be provided until January next year? Work was being done to bring existing stock back into use for families to live in, which are the solutions Senator Kelleher was talking about, but what was the position with Dublin City Council for the full quarter and how many other local authorities throughout the country were affected by that? Is funding back in place from January next year to bring voids back into the market? Why were we not advised about that position? What was the reason for no further funding being given for those voids, particularly in Dublin City Council?

Regarding the Minister's targets for home delivery, he referred in his statement to 4,400 additional social homes provided by local authorities and approved housing bodies, AHBs, under build, acquisition and leasing. How many of the 4,400 were acquisition and how many were acquisition of turnkey properties? The Minister talks about housing needs having been met under Rebuilding Ireland. It is important for people to know that, as part of that, three times more people's housing needs, and it is the Minister's definition of the housing needs, have been met through short-term measures such as HAP and the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, which is basically in the private rental sector through State subvention and State assistance with rent payments. It is 13,600 versus 4,400. That is not sustainable. The Minister spoke at previous meetings about a tipping point where the housebuilding would overtake the new tenancies. Is he still on target to reach that by 2021, which is the target he gave us previously? The over-reliance on HAP and RAS sticks out like a sore thumb. They are not sustainable solutions for families. The Minister regularly speaks about people being transient and choices for people. It is not most people's choice to have a 12-month lease with a private landlord where rent is being paid by the State, and he knows it. Will the Minister say how many of the 4,400 were turnkey purchases by AHBs? How many were purchased by local authorities?

On the housing delivery office, how many people are in that office, which he is transferring to the Local Government Management Agency, LGMA? Are there plans to beef up the office? How many vacancies are there in that unit? The Minister said he is transferring it over to the LGMA and that is probably the right place for it. What impact or effect does he think that will have?

On the issue of affordable purchase, more than 12 months ago the Minister received submissions from many local authorities dealing with the draft criteria for an affordable purchase scheme. The Minister said in his statement that the affordable dwelling purchase scheme is being drafted. When will it be completed and published? Last July, the four Dublin local authorities voted on and accepted the draft criteria. The Minister will be aware that local authorities that wish to deliver affordable purchase schemes cannot launch them in the absence of a national scheme. I am asking for a timeframe. While affordable purchase and affordable rental are included in Rebuilding Ireland and the Minister talks about them regularly, the reality is that we have not delivered a single home under an affordable purchase scheme. The reason is that the Minister has not published a national affordable purchase scheme. What is the position with that and how long more will we have to wait for it?

With regard to social housing, the Minister said 92,000 households are on the housing waiting list. How many households are on the transfer list? Are local authorities still removing people from the main housing list if they move into a HAP tenancy? Do we know how many are on the housing transfer list and which local authorities are moving them off the main list and which are not? I am aware that some have recently refused to move people from the main housing list, but what is the reason for that?

As regards rough sleepers, I note the Minister's comments about Waterford. That is welcome. All of us are acutely aware of the weather and the possibility of a harsh winter. Will the Minister elaborate further on the winter plan for rough sleepers? What additional funding will be provided by the Department and what additional resources are there for rough sleepers throughout the country? It is not just a Dublin issue, as the Minister knows.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Gone are the days when we discussed it pillar by pillar. There was a great deal in what the Deputy said.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Minister should answer what he can. If he cannot get through-----

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I will get through it all but can I ask for more time to do so?

Chairman: Yes, indeed.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Our rolling total at present is just over 23,000 new homes delivered over the 12-month period.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: For this year.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The rolling total is over a 12-month period so we have to wait until we get through the last quarter. It will not be until the first quarter of next year that we will be able to confirm whether we reached 25,000, but I believe we are there or thereabouts. We are talking about building houses and it is not an exact science in terms of being able to say we will get to 25,000 on the dot, 25,001, or whatever it might be, but all the percentage increases we are seeing point to us reaching it. We keep it under review and we do that by looking at commencement notices, planning permissions, completion notices and things like sentiment, although sometimes it is difficult to capture sentiment and to know exactly what it will mean for delivery.

Rebuilding Ireland contains different targets, but the main target is 125,000 new places to live by the end of 2021. We still have to get through 2020 and 2021, but already we have delivered 64,000 new places to live since the third quarter of 2016, while there are 26,000 on site over the past 12 months and there are more than 30,000 with planning permission. We can be certain we are going to hit that target from two years beforehand, unless there is some type of massive shock to the economy that is not foreseen at present. Even if there were and if we look at worst-case scenarios, the funding we are providing is based on an average of 2% growth over the remaining two years, and all indicators at present show that growth will be higher than that. Even if there was a shock, the funding would be in place to support that delivery of social housing. I believe it will continue on the private side as well, given the kind of demand that is there.

Families should go into homes. No one is saying anything different to that. Until we have enough homes built, however, we must have emergency measures in place which are suitable. We brought out the hub programme because we recognised hotels were not suitable. We needed to get families into hubs and that work continues. We are constantly adding new hubs. Two new hubs have been opened in my constituency in the past few months. There is a pipeline for around 400 new hub spaces.

The difficulty is that, sometimes, local authorities bring forward a plan for a hub but it will fall for different reasons. Maybe the local authority is in negotiations with somebody who owns the land or the site. Maybe the negotiations do not conclude in the local authority's favour. It has been the case that in my engagements with local authorities over the past two and a half

years they might have thought they had four hubs coming but only two materialise. That is why we ask them to always have a contingency in place should something fail.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Are these 400 new spaces family or individual places?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: That is not 400 hubs but 400 family spaces.

On voids, do we want to get into a conversation about Dublin City Council funding? I do not know where its priorities are. It has been given €43 million over the past number of years to deal with the voids programme. Up to 1,500 voids will be dealt with this year nationally because we recognise local authority vacancy rates need to be dealt with. That is why we have had this voids programme. We are getting to the end of it, however, in terms of the available voids. This year, we will remediate 1,500 voids but we will only count about 300 in terms of our targets because those are the ones which almost needed rebuilding. The others might be more akin to casual vacancy. We want to move away from that.

We will use the funding under this programme to ensure the homes are not vacant for too long a time. Dublin City Council seems to have plenty of money for housing.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I know the Minister will mention the €23 million for a project.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Of course I will because Dublin City Council has been criticising central government for not giving it any funding. I approve funding and this is what happens.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Eight out of nine Fine Gael councillors voted for the project.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: That is their choice. That is democracy. I do not agree with it, however.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I genuinely want to try to get to the bottom of why no funding for voids was issued in the largest local authority area, Dublin City Council, since September.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I would be amazed if the problem was at our end.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Perhaps one of the Minister's officials could tell us what interaction Dublin City Council has had with his Department.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: We fund a voids programme based on what the council said it would do. We have given Dublin City Council additional funding over the past couple years to remediate hundreds of voids. I have been in those discussions directly with Brendan Kenny about the council's voids programme, what it can do and how those voids will help people out of homelessness. I am not sure what Dublin City Council is now claiming about running out of funding. We have a tight voids programme with the council. All voids done have to go through the programme and are signed off at official level to ensure they were voids and proper work was done.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I do not want to detain the Minister on this one but it is important. Is he saying that the Department is not aware of any issue with funding for voids with Dublin City Council since September this year?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: This is the first time I have heard of it. I would be amazed if the fault was on our side. Every time an issue like this is raised with me, the fault is not with

my Department.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Is it correct then that the Department is not aware of this?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I am not aware of it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is fine.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: On social housing, the breakdown should be there in the report published the other day. In 2019, we are going to achieve - there or thereabouts - our target for more than 6,000 being built as part of the increase of 10,000 in stock. The impression with turnkeys is that the local authority or the housing body buys a completed housing estate and it is just a question of handing over the keys. Often the houses have not been built, however. The local authority wants houses in a particular area but it does not own the land.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Often that is not the case either.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: It approaches a developer to build the homes and it will pay for them. The local authority has funded it and homes have been built. Calling them turnkey is a mistake.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Minister knows what I am asking about.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Chairman, the Deputy is asking a lot of questions.

Chairman: It is becoming a bit of a back-and-forth session. The Deputy should let the Minister answer.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will come back to it.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Yes, the tipping point of 2021 will be reached. We will put more new families into social housing homes than into the housing assistance payment by the end of 2021. On the housing delivery office, I had a meeting with the CCMA, City and County Management Association, on this only the other day regarding the people who have been doing the housing delivery office work in the Department and then the movement across to the LGMA, Local Government Management Agency, along with its staffing requirements. Off the top of my head, I think the number of staff involved is in the region of 15 or 16. I will come back to the Deputy with the exact figure. The functions of some staff change in the Department as they are picked up by another person. There will be extra people hired.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Is the Minister saying that more than three are transferring over?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The conversation I had with the CCMA was about it recruiting experts from within its own sector. The housing delivery office will be able to help local authorities deliver better. Where we have a resource in a particular local authority which is good at procurement, they will be able to transfer into the housing delivery office and help other local authorities do that as well. They will be responsible for bringing more staff in.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am just asking how many staff are in the housing delivery office and how many are transferring over?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The housing delivery office, because we are transferring the functions to the LGMA, is now down to two people.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Is there two transferring over?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: No, it is down to two. Their functions will change within the Department and then the new hires will be made.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thought it was three but it is two.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The function is transferring, not the people.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Will the Minister allow ten extra staff on top of that?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: That is to be determined but it is around that figure. It is up to the LGMA to do it. Just to be clear, as the functions transfer over, we have been shifting the functions of the current staff in the housing delivery office to other areas of priority.

On affordable housing, the priority schemes are almost complete with all local authorities. Up to 26 local authorities have carried out their economic assessments. The pieces are almost all in place. The last piece is the eligibility criteria and the financial criteria. I do not want local authorities launching schemes until the homes are ready to be occupied. We do not want people having to wait another two years. There is still time and we will have it done in time. Local authorities for those first affordability schemes can put their systems in place to allow people to apply for the homes in Boherboy in Cork, for example, which will become available next year.

LIHAF, local infrastructure housing activation fund, homes have already been made available with cost reduction and have already been sold.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is different.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The Ó Cualann model was funded by the State.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Is the Minister claiming that now?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Deputy, you have had a full monologue for questions. I have been very good in having a back and forth with you. Please do not just chip in when you feel like you want to make a comment.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Why not? Are we not well behaved enough for the Minister?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: It is like a Jack Russell nipping at me.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: All I wanted to get was a date on affordable purchase schemes.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: We are working through it and we will have the schemes in place in time for people.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: In time.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Is in time not good enough?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: When?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: It will not be after the event and it will not be too early to annoy people.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am not asking the Minister to be facetious. I am genuinely

trying to get a timeframe.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: A year ago, I gave the Deputy a timeframe about getting the eligibility criteria in place first, then the economic assessments for those local authorities not on the priority list and then we will do the financial criteria.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am entitled to ask for a timeframe.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I have been signalling this every step of the way.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It has not been answered.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: It has been answered.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Is it May next year?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I have answered the question every time the Deputy has asked it. Just because he is not happy because it is not yet in place does not mean that I have not answered his question. I have told the Deputy that we do not want it in place too early because that would be pointless. People should not apply for schemes which may not be open for another 12 months. It will be ready in time and when the schemes are ready to open. That is what people need.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: In time.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Stop interrupting me. Please.

Chairman: We have been more than fair with this.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: In time is the answer.

Chairman: The Minister has given the answer.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The Deputy had five minutes. He asked a series of different questions across the entire Rebuilding Ireland programme. I have no problem answering them if I am given the space to do so. I have been fair in answering but he has interrupted me. He cannot start this back and forth and not let me finish a sentence. It is very improper in terms of the conduct of the committee.

It is important to note that affordability concerns certain parts of the country. If one excludes the greater Dublin area, Cork and Galway, 85% of homes are sold at prices that constitute less than double-digit growth. Why are prices in the market flat or falling? It is because we have increased supply. These measures that we have in Rebuilding Ireland are helping in the general affordability issue. If we are not to make the mistakes that other cities have made, however, we must recognise the Government has to step in to bridge the affordability gap. That is what the serviced sites fund and LIHAF are about. That is what we will continue to drive to get these homes open for people as they need them.

The housing assistance payment is housing support. It is meeting a person's housing needs using taxpayers' money to do so. It works for many people in terms of the flexibility that is there in terms of working more hours or being able to move location more easily, depending on how their life circumstances change. It is an important support but we should not be dependent on it to the extent we are. I said that before. We now have movement within local authorities regarding the housing assistance payment. We also have a HAP transfer list. More

than 1,000 people have moved from the HAP transfer list to a social housing home. They have been independent or have sought support and they have got HAP support and they are now in social housing homes. There is a pathway through HAP into social housing as it is traditionally understood, and it is important that we continue that.

Regarding our arrangements for the winter period, as I said at our previous meeting we want to bring in 300 new long-term emergency beds, not the contingency cots that get rolled out during a severe weather event. More than half of those have already been put in place. That equates roughly to the increased number of adult males in the October count in terms of individuals in emergency accommodation. There is a correlation there between the new beds that were bought and the increase in the number of people in emergency accommodation. The funding is there. That is not an issue. The cold weather initiative has already been activated on a number of occasions so far this year because of the cold nights that we have had. We have seen a decrease in rough sleeper numbers, which is very welcome. It is at its lowest point since 2015. That is not by accident. It is because of the work that is being done by the Department, the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, DRHE, the local authorities and the NGOs. A lot of work is happening to help people who are most exposed when it comes to the housing crisis, in particular at this time of year.

Chairman: I am not particularly happy with the tone of the meeting thus far. We have five minutes to ask questions and the Minister has five minutes to answer. The committee has been constructive to date. This is my second such meeting on this matter. The Minister is being constantly barraged with interruptions. That is not fair. We would not treat any other witness like this. We should afford some respect to the Minister.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Chairman-----

Chairman: If Deputy O'Brien is not satisfied with the answer, that is fine. He will have another opportunity to put his questions again.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I was not being disrespectful to the Minister.

Chairman: If Deputy O'Brien is not satisfied with the answer and he feels it is incomplete, then he will have an opportunity to ask the question again in the second round. It has taken 18 minutes so far to deal with what should have been a ten-minute block. That will cost Deputy O'Brien's colleagues in his own party and it will cost the rest of the committee time in terms of their questions as well.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: If I could speak briefly, it was no disrespect to the Minister or his position. If I ask a question, I like to get an answer. If I ask for a timeline, I do not think "in time" is an answer. That is all. I will leave it at that.

Chairman: Deputy O'Brien will have a second round of questions to make his point again if he so wishes.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will leave it at that.

Deputy Pat Casey: In preparation for this meeting, my intention was to try to focus on the number of people exiting and entering homelessness and trying to get an average. I then tried to look at what the impact of not having it off-balance sheet would have on the delivery of housing over the next five years. I also wish to focus on how we have failed to convert vacant private housing into use. In addition, I wished to focus on the 59-week process and the four-stage

process. I got the quarter 2 report for 2019. I previously expressed my frustration at having to copy it in PDF and convert it to Excel, which is still not available. I was working my way through it in detail to ask specific questions. I sat at the computer last night and tried to get the Minister's opening statement, and I saw that, lo and behold, the report for quarter 3 of 2019 has been issued. The report contains 99 pages of data, so I decided I had had enough. I sat through 12 meetings on Rebuilding Ireland and 150 committee meetings.

When I went home I asked myself what it is all about. We are coming up to the Christmas period. While listening to the radio on the way to the meeting I heard it said that it is the end of the decade. A colleague asked me how this Dáil would be viewed in 20 years. I was at a commemoration in Castletown last week for Liam Mellows, where we spoke about principles and the Proclamation. We spoke about the extract in the Proclamation of cherishing all the children of the nation equally. When we look back at the period of this Dáil and previous Dáileanna, we will look at this as a decade of neglect of the children of Ireland. Homelessness is at the heart of that neglect.

I am not a parent. I do not know what it is like to have children in this country, but I know about children from my life experiences and from people coming into my offices. I think of Pam, whose son Ryan is seriously ill, and the efforts she makes to protect her son and to try to provide a quality of life for the rest of her family, but the State keeps making it harder. I think of my own niece who went through a serious problem with self-harm, and but for the fact that she could afford private healthcare, she would have been left abandoned, because children are waiting 18 months for assessment. Jigsaw has offered for the past four years to locate in Wicklow to deal with mental health issues but we cannot bloody well find it a premises. A total of 215,000 are waiting for healthcare. Families contact me every second day of the week who do not know where their children are going to go to school.

My own hotel has been used for homeless families. I have seen them coming in and out. I have seen children who just do not want to engage because it is not a happy experience to go to a hotel. I have seen the other side in the hotel as well where staff are asked to intervene in families with complex needs but they are not trained to do that. Members of my family, who are not with us today, would have been very proud that I was elected to this Dáil, but I do not know whether they would be as proud of the effort I have made in trying to deal with situations like child homelessness. I regret to say to the Minister that, politically, he will have to take the blame for this, but we are all involved in it, every single one of us, and it is up to us all to try to address this. We are all on the bus. The Minister might be driving it and choosing the gears but, equally, we all have responsibilities. Solutions have been provided and they have been ignored. The committee has provided the Minister with detailed reports and we have made suggestions ourselves, but it has to be about getting away from the noise of all the data, all the reports, all the spin, all the launches and focusing back on what it must be about, namely, child homelessness. Let us not make another decade like the one we had for the last decade. I am sorry, Chairman, but I am a bit frustrated.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Casey.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank Deputy Casey for his contribution. He tied together a number of challenges that people and some families in particular in this country are having at the moment that are not all related to housing. As Deputies, we all have constituents who have problems and we all try to help them in the ways that we can. We have a responsibility nationally as parliamentarians to make sure that this country is moving in the right direction and not the wrong direction. We have a challenge at the moment in public discourse to make sure that

we do not lose sight of the importance of an evidence-based approach to policy and that we do not casually dismiss facts even though they might tell us things that we do not agree with or that are uncomfortable, such as facts about the number of children in emergency accommodation, which is too high. It was the case decades ago that things that made people uncomfortable in society were kept hidden from the public through a consensus of politicians, media and the people at the top of the tree, as it were. That has hurt too many people across too many decades.

One of the things I have been determined to do as a politician is to make sure that we have greater accountability for politicians and greater transparency. It is one of the reasons we publish all the information that we do. It is one of the reasons we give members as much raw data as they would like. Whether they want to look at it or not is a separate thing, but we must have a transparent Parliament and Government and an accountable Parliament and Government. We must make sure that no one tries to dismiss the challenges people have today, as families or individuals, despite the fact that other indicators tell us how well the country is doing or the number of jobs being created. These are all very important things, but it is equally important that those who are most vulnerable in society are being cared for. It is important that we try to protect public debate around things like what is happening and what needs to be done.

Deputy Casey talked about some of the things he was thinking about asking. I might answer some of those questions if I may, because it is important that so far, just looking at Dublin alone, we have seen approximately 786 families leave emergency accommodation this year. That is not enough, but those 786 families are now in a home and that is important too.

Deputy Casey asked about vacancies in private dwellings. We have seen between 7,000 and 10,000 homes come out of private vacancy back into use since Rebuilding Ireland. There are still more to come, but that is a lot of homes that would not have been in use were it not for the efforts that are happening in the wider economy, not just in relation to new builds but vacancy as well.

Deputy Casey referred to the four-stage process. It is important that we should not have any unnecessary delays for people who are waiting for homes. The four-stage process was much longer - it was a nine-stage process - and it takes 59 weeks. As I said yesterday in the Dáil, certain local authorities such as Wicklow County Council have got it down to 44 weeks. The same person who worked on that is now the chairperson of the LGMA and will be involved in the housing delivery office to help reduce timelines even further in some local authority areas.

Deputy Casey said I have ignored solutions that have been brought to the table. I have not ignored one solution. I am the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government. We spoke about this in the debate the other night. Some Opposition Deputies think their only responsibility is to introduce Private Members' Bills or ask questions in the Dáil based on what they hear in their clinics. They see that as their job. If that is what they think, that is fair enough. I am the Minister every day. I work on this every day. There is not one proposal that has been put to me that I have not considered in detail. Indeed I have gone back to some proposals six or 12 months later to look at them again and ask if we got things right.

Regarding other solutions, Fine Gael is in the minority. If the Deputies believe that a rent freeze is a solution, for example, which I do not believe, there is a vehicle for that to progress through the Houses separately from Government. I do not think it will, because I do not believe Fianna Fáil is taking a transparent stance on this. I have considered every solution that has been brought to me. Deputy O'Brien introduced the Planning and Development (Amendment) (First-Time Buyers) Bill 2019. I saw a lot of problems with that Bill.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It passed Second Stage.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank the Deputy for interrupting again. It is incredible.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Minister is welcome.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: There were a lot of problems with that Bill, and I outlined them in the Dáil at the time. If it reaches Committee Stage, I will outline them then too. Nothing has stopped a good idea from making it through the House. Let us be fair to ourselves. When we introduced the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 earlier in the year, positive proposals made by Deputies on all sides of the House were supported and introduced. The regulation of the approved housing body sector, which is incredibly important given the thousands of homes it is building and tenanting on behalf of the State, moved very quickly because good ideas were accepted and carried through. That is how we do our best work. It is not when we are standing up in the Dáil and shouting at each other or causing friction over what might be seen as petty squabbles in the Dáil Chamber or in the committees. It is when we come together on legislation, make it work, get it done and implement it. That is when we are at our best. We have done that in several instances with Rebuilding Ireland. We lose sight of that.

It goes back to something that Senator Kelleher was saying earlier on. People glibly say that nothing is happening and nothing is being done. I see it written in the papers and I hear it in the Dáil. If we keep on saying that despite the evidence of progress in several key areas, the public will lose faith in all of us very quickly. It is not true to say that nothing is being done or that everything is happening as quickly as we want and going perfectly. I was not the first to say that. Someone from one of the NGOs, perhaps Focus Ireland, said it. We need to acknowledge where progress is being made and where more progress can be made. We need to find solutions that we can all agree on and that can make it out of these Houses into the real world without doing more harm than good.

Senator Martin Conway: I welcome the Minister. His last contribution summed up a lot of things. His job is an extremely difficult one but the facts speak for themselves. One of the most interesting facts is that our population is growing. It is estimated that our population could hit 6 million within the next decade and a half. The new people coming here have to be accommodated as well. At 11 a.m. I will be attending the launch of a report by another committee, of which I am a member, on direct provision. Some 11,000 people are seeking asylum in this country. We are accommodating more than 7,000 of them in emergency accommodation and direct provision centres. The other 4,000 are finding their own accommodation. There are huge challenges. There is absolutely no doubt that good work is being done. Some 50,000 people are in homes now who were not in homes in 2016. Some 50,000 houses have been built since 2016. That is very important and must be noted. That said, there is a lot more to be done.

The Minister does not get enough credit for the work he has done. There are very serious concerns, and for anybody or any child to be homeless is totally unacceptable. However one would swear by some of the commentary that the Minister thinks it is acceptable. I consider the Deputy one of the more genuine members of Government and he is trying to deal with this problem. It is a difficult one. There has to be fairness, balance and respect in the debate.

One problem I have identified is local authorities. There is a serious problem with delivery by local authorities on the ground. I fully appreciate the fact that the Minister's Department has made money available for them to draw down, but there seems to be a problem with local authorities scaling up and getting on with the development of housing. I am often told that a

matter is with the Department, which is delaying in replying. I have gotten to the stage where I do not believe that. My contention is that local authorities have not stepped up to the plate to the degree that they should have. I welcome the fact that the Minister meets the chief executives every three or four months. Is there anything he could do or any structure he could put in place to force local authorities to move faster? The Minister of State, Deputy English, came before the committee last week to discuss Traveller accommodation. One local authority was allocated €850,000 in 2018 and drew down only €13,000. Does the Minister agree that there is a serious problem with local authorities on the ground delivering on the Government's housing policy and strategy?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: That is a very important point to make. The number of homes built in the State in 2013 was just over 4,000. The construction sector was decimated in the crash. We had to get to increase the number of homes being built to meet the demand that was already there, but during that time demand has been increasing because of net immigration due to the economy doing well. This has created an additional pressure that was not there before. The population will continue to grow. We have hardwired a further increase in the annual output of homes into the national development plan that will come into force after Rebuilding Ireland to be more in line with the projections the Central Bank was talking about the other day. It is important that we recognise that demand will increase, and we have to continue to drive an increase in the delivery of new homes.

We have regular Cabinet sub-committee meetings where we discuss people who are in direct provision, have been granted leave to remain and need a home. We discuss ways to get them into homes and out of direct provision through things like the housing assistance payment, HAP. I refer also to the refugee programme. The really good work done by the State in helping almost 2,000 refugees into homes and communities throughout Ireland seems to go under the radar. It is different from direct provision, because those people have been identified through a process outside of the State. They do not come into the country through the direct provision system. They go into homes. That programme has been very successful and we are going to do more.

I thank the Senator for the support. Like him, I am not here for the credit. None of us is. We are here to do the job because we believe we have a responsibility to do it, but I thank him for his words of support.

People are sometimes very quick to criticise local authorities. I have defended them since day one and said they would be the primary vehicle for the delivery of social housing. So they are, and we have hardwired that into our delivery of housing. However, some have more challenges than others. Slightly more than 400 social housing homes were built in the State in 2014. This year we will build more than 6,000. That is because of Rebuilding Ireland. Again, people say Rebuilding Ireland is not working, but this is a fact that shows it has increased delivery. It is not enough yet, but next year we will build more social housing homes than were built in any of the boom years, when the economy was said to be fine and houses were flying up. Some 90,000 were built in one year. Next year we will build more social housing than was built in any of those years. That says something about the priority this Government places on social housing. That does not get reported either, but that is what happens in political debate. Some of the facts get crowded out.

Local authorities are sometime too quick to blame the Department. One of the process changes we have implemented involves the publication of annual targets that they have to meet. There are two areas where I believe new measures can help local authorities be more account-

able and do more. One of these is the task force approach. We brought this to Cork, where it has been very successful. I cannot remember the numbers off the top of my head, but the two Cork local authorities were building almost nothing as recently as 2014. This year, there are approximately 1,000 homes in its pipeline, which is very impressive. That shows how the task force model can work. We have now deployed it to Galway as the two councils in the county have really struggled. That will help drive delivery in Galway.

The big issue is the movement of the housing delivery office into the local authority sector. The local authorities will be responsible for driving delivery, while the Department will continue to have oversight and will continue to publish national targets. They have an impressive digital tool which can show in each local authority which projects are at stage 1, 2, 3 or 4, which are on site and which are at pre-planning stage. It can give a very detailed understanding of exactly where we are to date in each public authority and where we will be in the next three to four years. As that tool is delivered in the housing delivery office within the Local Government Management Agency, every local authority and councillor will be able to ask for the update live on screen and interrogate the numbers. There will, therefore, be more accountability at local authority level for councillors. That is also needed. Councillors need to recognise the important role they have in ensuring that their respective local authority is meeting its targets for housebuilding and in respect of families in emergency accommodation. When I look at the record of debate in some local authorities, I am not sure they are giving the time they should be giving to issues such as housing and people in emergency accommodation. Hopefully, these new tools will give councillors more power to demand more of their respective executive.

Senator Martin Conway: I will make an observation that the Minister might consider. It is not appropriate for elected public representatives to lodge objections to planning applications, particularly social housing or Traveller accommodation. The system is in place. Members of the public can object if they wish. The local authority makes a decision and if people are not happy with it, they can appeal it to An Bord Pleanála. I call on councillors and Members of the Oireachtas to be careful and not to object to social housing. We have a housing crisis and we all have to show leadership on it.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank the Senator and echo his call. There is hypocrisy in this debate and I encounter it every day. When people start to speak they are visibly distressed about the number of people in emergency accommodation and by the end they are talking about how they are against apartments being built at the end of their road. The two things are connected.

Senator Martin Conway: Absolutely.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I have never lodged an objection to housing in my life, either as a councillor or Member of the Oireachtas, because I do not believe that is our function. It really bothers me when I see Deputies trying to rabble-rouse local residents around objections, even around judicial reviews. Those same Deputies then give out about the Government not doing enough about housing. Politicians need to get out of the way here and let the planning system do its job.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: We are all concerned because we have a crisis. In October last, the number of people registered as homeless stood at 10,514, including 3,826 children. That is very worrying. Nearly four years on, Rebuilding Ireland is not working. I have listened to the Minister recently. I missed his contribution in the Seanad but I listened back over the debate. I have also listened to him in the Dáil. I do not think anyone wants to make political points because we have past that now. Like all members, I have people coming

into my clinics crying because they have nowhere to go. There is hidden homelessness that no one is talking about. People are going from house to house staying on couches and they do not qualify to go on a local authority housing list. I have asked the Minister since I became a Senator to change the income threshold for becoming eligible to apply to be placed on the local authority housing list in County Carlow. At €27,500, it is one of the lowest in the country. It is unacceptable that there has been no review in nearly nine years. I tabled a Commencement matter the other day and the Minister of State, Deputy English, came to the Seanad to respond. He was very nice and he indicated a review would take place in January. I was told it would be done in September last. It is almost 2020 and we still do not have a review.

The Minister said he was listening but I do not know if he is. I raise this matter with him every time we meet. People who are working do not qualify to go on the local authority housing list because they might be earning €28,000 or €29,000. They pay rent of €1,000 a month and cannot afford to save. They are caught in the net and have no supports or help. These people are crying out for help. We have failed them. We have so many soup kitchens around Ireland and food parcels being given out because people are not coping. Housing is the biggest issue.

The Minister should implement a time limit for families living in emergency accommodation. They should be housed within five or six months. I ask the Minister and his Department, which plays a major role in this, to do something to ensure children are not left writing their letters to Santa from emergency accommodation. We heard yesterday on the radio a letter from a child to Santa asking if he would find the child in a hotel. That little child, who wrote the same letter from a hotel last year, had to do it again this year. That is unacceptable. Six months is plenty of time, even too long. People should not be in emergency accommodation for that long. A timescale is needed.

On the shortage of social housing, local authorities need to start building housing again. They are not building enough. The Minister has gone down the route of approved housing bodies. While that is welcome, we still need to go back to having local authorities building houses. One of the biggest issues is that the houses being built are not the right type. People are living longer and many have disabilities. Three and four bedroom houses are being built. We need to adjust the types of housing to accommodate people with disabilities. The lack of two-bedroom houses is becoming a big issue for lone parents. Single people cannot get a house or apartment because there are none available. The overall build and criteria need to be reconsidered. I encounter this issue every day.

Affordable housing is a major issue. The Minister referred to a figure of €250,000 as affordable. That is too high. An affordable home for a family in County Carlow would be about €120,000.

People cannot buy out a house owned by an approved housing body. That is one of the criteria and it needs to be examined in the long term. Good families are getting these houses and with more employment coming back on stream, they need to be given the option to buy. I could not believe the criteria that apply to tenants seeking to buy a local authority house when they were introduced last year. The tenant must have 50% income coming into the house. A tenant in a local authority house could win the lotto in the morning but would still be unable to buy the house if he or she is not working. It does not make sense. I could come in here and go on a rant and I feel like doing that but there would be no point because the Minister is under enough pressure. However, common sense needs to apply to certain issues.

The biggest issue I wish to raise is mental health. People with mental health issues who

present to their local authority are finding that there are no services available for them. I am dealing with two cases involving homeless people who cannot get help for mental health issues. The Department said it will improve mental health and primary care services for homeless persons using the existing allocation, but there is no funding. The Minister told me there are weekend services available. I am on the ground in my area 24-7 and they are not there. I can tell the Minister every seed, breed and generation of what is happening and I know there are no weekend services. He also needs to address that issue.

I can say categorically that the rent pressure zones are not working. We have a rent pressure zone in Carlow town but not in Bagenalstown, Tullow and other areas. How does the Department distinguish between these areas? Well over 1,000 people are on the housing list in Carlow. There are three municipal districts. One district, Carlow town, qualifies but the others do not. This does not work. The Minister needs to reconsider that. I firmly believe it is not working.

Chairman: The Senator has gone over her seven minutes. She can come back in on the second round.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I have much more to say.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank the Senator for her contribution. Thankfully, there was a reduction in the number of families and children in emergency accommodation in October. The increase that happened was driven by adults. That roughly correlates with the number of new beds we put in place and also with the number of people who are no longer rough sleeping. There has been a movement off the streets or out of unsuitable accommodation into emergency accommodation. Obviously, we do not want to see the numbers going up, but if people are getting better care and supports and we can get them out of homelessness on a sustainable basis, it is a good thing to be able to do.

Despite what I said only moments ago, the Senator casually fell into suggesting that Rebuilding Ireland is not working.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: It is not.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: As an elected representative, the Senator must be responsible enough to be able to distinguish between what is working in the context of the plan and what she thinks is not working. It is irrefutable - it is recorded by the CSO - that there are 64,000 new places in which to live that were not there prior to the introduction of Rebuilding Ireland. In the past 12 months, 26,000 homes have gone into construction and there are more to come. The number of people on social housing lists has decreased by 25% since 2016. On social housing, approximately 400 homes were built in 2014. Over 6,000 will be built this year. This type of delivery is being achieved under Rebuilding Ireland.

It is regrettable and unacceptable that there has been an increase of approximately 2,500 in the numbers going into emergency accommodation since I became Minister. However, in the same period, 12,000 households have exited homelessness as a result of Rebuilding Ireland. The plan is working to help those families into the homes that are being built. It is working to help get double-digit price inflation in house prices down to being flat or falling in many areas. I accept that we still have challenges in the rental sector, but we have independent evidence showing that rent pressure zones have taken between two and three percentage points off rent inflation, which is welcome but not enough. We need to do more which is why we changed the rent pressure zone legislation earlier this year.

Focusing on Carlow, since the introduction of Rebuilding Ireland, more than 1,500 households have been supported. Rebuilding Ireland is working for those households. There has been a reduction in the social housing lists in Carlow, where 519 households are now waiting for homes. Some 485 homes are in the pipeline for Carlow. Rebuilding Ireland is working to build those homes. That is the distinction we have to make.

The income eligibility criteria for social housing have been examined. The Housing Agency has done work on it. In the past month, I have met my officials to analyse different potential ways to deal with the eligibility criteria and consider the knock-on effects and possible risks. On the previous occasion on which I appeared before the committee I stated that we are introducing a series of reforms in respect of social housing that are based on recommendations from a number of reports published in recent years. I want to introduce them together because they have an impact on each other. These reforms relate to tenant purchase, eligibility criteria for social housing, succession rights and differential rents. They are all interrelated to one degree or another. There is also a relationship between social housing eligibility and affordability. In my view it needs to be dealt with in the round. I had hoped to get the matter to Cabinet before the Christmas break, but that will not now happen. I hope to bring it to Cabinet early in the new year.

On the timeline for people in emergency accommodation, those in hubs wait for six months on average. In general, the majority of families and children are in emergency accommodation for less than 12 months or less. We are constantly trying to drive those numbers down. We would like everybody to be in emergency accommodation for no more than six months. As we get more hubs, that will help. We need to get to a position where having a family in emergency accommodation is unique. We cannot continue to have thousands in emergency accommodation. At present, approximately 1,700 families are in emergency accommodation.

As I mentioned to Deputy Casey earlier, so far this year more than 700 families have exited emergency accommodation. Families are coming in and leaving, but more are coming in. We need to get to a point where no more are coming in so that it is all prevention and not just one in two families. We also need to ensure that those who are in emergency accommodation today get out of it and into homes. We will do that as we increase supply. All the evidence under Rebuilding Ireland indicates that is exactly what is happening. That is why I can point to more than 700 families who have exited emergency accommodation or those increases in the number exiting not into HAP-funded accommodation, but into a social housing home.

On affordable housing, the prices in the Boherboy development is €200,000, perhaps a little bit higher. At a cost of €200,000, an individual earning €36,000 can afford to buy that home using a Rebuilding Ireland home loan. A couple earning €44,000, for example, a garda and a nurse starting off in work for the first time, can afford to buy a home costing between €200,000 and €250,000. That is what we mean by affordability. We want to get that across far more sites than we have today.

The Senator mentioned housing for disabled people and for the elderly. I have a list in front of me of different sites containing houses for the elderly. We are trying to hardwire this into the local authorities so that as they develop sites, they provide houses for people with special needs and people who are elderly. I have been on those sites. There is a great site in Kilkenny with everything from apartments to homes to elderly accommodation.

I recently opened a housing scheme in County Kildare. The Ceann Comhairle was present on the day. One of the homes was built for an adult with particular special needs. That home

was built in a way that they could move seamlessly from a bathroom, which was a wet room, into the bedroom with a hoist system, wider doorways, lower kitchen levels and no plumbing under the sink so that a person in a wheelchair can manoeuvre under the sink. All these things need to be and are being considered by local authorities in providing social housing.

Even though the numbers on social housing lists are falling, those lists contain a predominance of single individuals or couples. As a result, the social housing stock being built needs to reflect that. That means more apartments than have been built heretofore. We are seeing some of that come through. We might like to see a bit more from the housing bodies and the local authorities. That is something that needs to be addressed and will be addressed with the housing delivery office.

Chairman: I call Deputy Barry, who will be followed by Deputies Ó Broin and Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Mick Barry: I wish to focus on HAP. Before doing so, however, I have two other quick questions to ask. In September, Deputy Coppinger highlighted in the Dáil the issue of landlords demanding sexual favours in place of rent. The Minister indicated that he was in talks with various organisations about a national survey next year, not exclusively about this matter but as part of another survey there would be a question on that. I ask him for an update on that.

A constituent of mine bought a house just before the austerity crisis. Their partner lost their job leading to a crisis with household income. The arrangement they had to come to with the bank was that they were bankrupt and they lost their house through bankruptcy. The woman in question has been told that she cannot apply for a Rebuilding Ireland home loan with the council because of that bankruptcy. She has suggested an exemption for people in her position. Would the Minister consider that?

There was considerable correspondence in advance of today's meeting containing lots of facts, figures, graphs etc. The growth of the HAP sector in the recent years is really striking. Spending on HAP in 2016 was €58 million; in 2017, it was €153 million; in 2018, it was €276 million; and, in 2019, it is €422 million. The projected expenditure in the budget for 2020 is €503 million. It is nearly a ninefold increase in four years. This is the privatisation of social housing provision with enormous sums being given to landlords. Some within the sector are enriching themselves on the basis of these transfers. Some 60,000 HAP arrangements were put in place between 2016 and 2019. The graphs on pages 2 and 3 of the documents we were given show there were 9,208 new builds during that period, which HAP outstrips by 6:1 or 7:1. In the past year, there has been an increase of almost 13,000 in HAP, although it is only the third quarter of 2019, and just over 2,000 in new builds, which is also a ratio of approximately 6:1. Will the Minister drill down into the statistics for 2021 and outline a breakdown or roadmap as to how the flip will take place? I would also like him to drill down into the figures for new builds. How many of the 2,003 new builds in the first three quarters of this year were local authority council houses?

In summary, I would like a breakdown of the 2,000 new builds under the various headings and a figure for how many of them were new council houses. I expect that, unlike the HAP figure, the ratio will not be 6:1 or 7:1 but much smaller. That is probably an important issue the committee needs to get to grips with. I will leave it at that to give the Minister some time to drill down into those figures because they are important.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: On the issue of sex for rent and matters that Deputies Barry and

Coppinger have previously raised with me, we had meetings, which the Deputies will know because they attended them, and I had a further meeting on the matter earlier today. Following our previous engagement, in November, I made a commitment to the Deputies that I would contact the RTB and that we would also ensure that the Rape Crisis Centre was involved in the work we would do. I have contacted and written to the RTB, which will conduct a survey next year. Currently, at my request, it is liaising with the Rape Crisis Centre in respect of how we will ensure that we ask the correct types of questions in the survey, according to people who are experts in how such questions would be written. As far as I am aware, that work is under way, and the meeting I had earlier with officials was to follow up with the RTB and determine the progress.

Deputy Mick Barry: How wide-ranging will the survey be?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The meeting was about ensuring that the RTB was in touch with the Rape Crisis Centre and to develop the criteria for questions and how they might be formulated. The survey is ambitious work that the RTB is doing, and it will involve a large sample. I cannot recall the figure the Deputy seeks, although I believe I gave it to him at our previous meeting. We will publish the details of the survey in order that everyone will see how large it will be and what area it will cover, to try to have a deeper dive into what is happening and the experiences of people in the private rented sector today. There will be much information about it, but we focused on one specific aspect in the meeting earlier and did not talk about the wider survey.

On Rebuilding Ireland and bankruptcy, I cannot speak to a specific case. Nevertheless, we have recognised that people may have had difficulties in their past. They may have been in a relationship, for example, and might have had a home under that relationship and now be separated or divorced. We did not want to exclude people in those circumstances from being able to participate in the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme. Likewise, if someone has gone through bankruptcy, he or she will be deemed to be a higher credit-worthy risk. He or she would not be excluded outright from being able to apply for a Rebuilding Ireland home loan but it would depend on the reasons for the bankruptcy and on whether he or she could meet the criteria for eligibility today, notwithstanding the fact that he or she will have been through bankruptcy. Such matters are decided by the credit committees and the Housing Agency. There are two or three levels of checks, depending on one's perspective and, ultimately, it is a decision for the local authority credit committee.

We made some changes to the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme this year, such as removing the variable rate. It had a higher element of risk but little uptake and, therefore, it was not a necessary product. We have also added better cost control measures with the local authorities for managing the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme. We constantly examine actions we can take.

On the case the Deputy raised, without getting into the details of a specific case in a public forum, if he could provide them to me, I will have officials determine whether there is a gap in respect of the local authorities.

Deputy Mick Barry: I will do that.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The spend on HAP is too high. It is so high because we have a dependency on HAP that we should not have. Until we increase the level of social and general house building sufficiently, that dependency will remain. Interestingly, the numbers show that we have spent less on HAP this year than in previous years, while the number of people being

supported in HAP under the plan has started to decrease. By the end of 2021, we want a greater number of people to be supported to move into social housing than in HAP over the course of that year, and for that to continue as a new trend beyond the lifetime of Rebuilding Ireland. As for social housing builds, more than 6,000 homes will be built this year, while next year will be a record year for social housing building, which is important to recognise. More social housing homes will be built next year than in any of the previous 20 years. That will make a significant difference for people who are waiting for social housing homes.

Beyond next year, into 2021, in terms of the build, acquisition and lease numbers, we will do more and support 12,000 more people into those homes than into HAP. By then, the number will have fallen to approximately 10,000 new HAPs and the two figures will continue to move in opposite directions from then. We need HAP because without it, where would the people go, given that the homes have not yet built? Until they have been, HAP will be there to support them, but from 2021, the figures will move in opposite directions. It is important to recognise that HAP existed previously but it was just not called HAP. It existed as a different type of rental support for people in the private rented sector. It has done some of that heavy lifting but is currently doing too much.

On social housing builds, all the figures are outlined in the construction status report published at the end of the year. I always publish an annual report that gives a detailed breakdown of how the houses have been delivered through each of the schemes we have. I am a bit confused as to why the Deputy distinguished between housing bodies and local authorities delivering social housing, given that he has previously praised housing bodies in the Dáil. It is misdirection to try to segregate the numbers to give a lower impression of what is happening for social housing-----

Deputy Mick Barry: Will the Minister just answer the question?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I will presently. At the end of this year, I will report on a ratio of approximately 2:1 for local authority builds to housing body builds because local authority housing does the heavy lifting.

Deputy Mick Barry: To clarify, there have been 6,000 new social housing builds this year. If the Minister is saying there will have been a 2:1 ratio of council builds to AHB builds, does he mean there will have been 4,000 council builds and 2,000 AHB builds this year, or has he included other statistics in the figure of 6,000? Will he give a breakdown of the 6,000 and outline precisely how many of them are council builds?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I will report on the matter fully when there is a full year. I do not like reporting or guessing in advance when four full quarters have not passed. The targets we published for 2019 were just over 6,500 for builds. The local authority part of that is more than 3,000, the housing body figure is more than 1,500, while the private sector part, through its Part V obligation, is more than 1,200. They are the components of the build target for this year, as was published. Every local authority has its own individual target, which was also published at the beginning of the year. In January, I will report on how the local authorities met the targets. I acknowledge that the Minister is not a fan of reporting at the end of quarter 3, and that he would prefer to report at the end of the year. Nevertheless, reams of reports are sent to every member of this committee which have figures broken down for the end of quarter 3 2019. That includes the figures on HAP, RAS, leasings, acquisitions, voids and new builds. We have all of that for quarter 3 2019. All I am asking for - I am asking for the third time - is for the figure at the end of quarter 3 for local authority builds. The Minister has a ballpark figure, if not the

exact one. Can we please have it?

Chairman: Minister, I do not know if you have the exact figure.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: What I said was that I do not like reporting on full year output at the end of quarter 3. I do not think it is very smart to do that, because one does not have the full four quarters to give a yearly output. I have been in this job for more than two and a half years now, and we had the same dialogue in 2018. At the end of each quarter, the Deputy came in here, looked at the quarters 1, 2 and 3 outputs and said we were not going to make our targets. Last year we were 3% shy of our build target, which is a remarkable thing to achieve given the increase between 2017 and 2018. That is an important point to make. The Deputy is trying to have the same narrative we had last year. It is a narrative that was proven false last year and will be proven false again this year. I am almost certain the quarter 3 report has this figure in it. I do not have it in front of me. If the report does not have it, I will get it and I will give it to Deputy Barry later in the meeting. As I have said, and as the Deputy pointed out, a huge amount of data are provided to the committee, including lots of different tables and different figures. I do not have that table in front of me but I can get the Deputy that figure. However, what the Deputy is going to do with that figure is claim that we are not going to hit the targets.

Deputy Mick Barry: Do not tell me what I am going to do. I am sorry Chairman-----

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The Deputy is going to say that the housing-----

Deputy Mick Barry: Do not tell me what I am going to say.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Prove me wrong then, Deputy.

Deputy Mick Barry: We are not talking about narratives here. I acknowledge that the Minister is saying that the number of social houses that will be delivered by the councils in quarter 4 will be more than a quarter of the figure for the year, because there is a push towards the end of the year. I understand that as I was a member of a council for 12 years. I am asking for a simple figure. How many council houses were built in this State to the end of quarter 3?

Chairman: The Minister has committed to giving you that figure.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I have it now. Quarter 3 showed us that just over 2,200 social housing homes were built. That also included the voids programme that I mentioned earlier, where just over 200 homes which would have been two-into-ones, derelictions and vacancies came back into social housing. It is just over 2,000 homes-----

Deputy Mick Barry: That is not what I asked for. That is the figure for social housing builds. I am asking for the figure for new council homes built by local authorities. What is that figure?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I heard social housing. What the Deputy is doing is exactly what I said he was going to do, which is not remarkable at all-----

Deputy Mick Barry: The Minister is twisting every which way in order not to give-----

Chairman: Deputy, this is your fifth intervention.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I am going to give the Deputy the number in a second-----

Deputy Mick Barry: I know it is the fifth time. That is the point. I should only have to

ask once, Chairman.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Deputy Barry is making a distinction between local authority build and housing body build. As far as he is concerned, housing body build is not social housing, even though it takes people from the social housing lists, it is being done by organisations that pre-date the existence of this State and it is done by organisations and housing bodies that, in many instances, when it comes to things like disabled housing, which Senator Murnane O'Connor talked about, have more of an expertise and an understanding. There have been 910 local authority builds, 600 housing body builds, and 493 delivered under the Part V obligation.

Deputy Mick Barry: The answer is 910. I thank the Minister.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I imagine the Deputy is going to run out of here and say only 900 homes have been built for social housing for this year and that we are not going to make our target of over 6,000. What I am telling the Deputy is that we are. He deployed the same narrative last year. We are in constant contact with the local authorities. We did a deep dive into their targets in the summer period. That showed us we are on track to get over 6,000, and recent engagements with local authorities say the same.

Deputy Mick Barry: Fine, I am happy now. It is 910.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The Deputy should enjoy it when does that, but it will not be accurate at the end of the year.

Chairman: Thank you Deputy and Minister.

I propose we suspend the meeting briefly. We will come back to Deputy Ó Broin's questions.

Sitting suspended at 11. 25 a.m. and resumed at 11. 28 a.m.

Chairman: Deputy Ó Broin, you have five minutes.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I would like to thank the officials from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Housing Agency for the substantial volume of material we got yesterday. I appreciate it takes a significant amount of work. This is not a criticism of the officials, whom I know are overburdened with work, but I want to express frustration that we get the information very late. It makes it more difficult for us to properly scrutinise the material if we get it late. Please do not take this as a criticism, because I know producing detailed reports takes a lot of time, but even if we could get this material a day in advance, it would make our jobs much easier.

As the Minister is aware, this committee unanimously agreed a report on family homelessness which we published in November and which had 14 very specific recommendations. I would be interested to know, not only if the Minister has considered the report, but if at this stage he could commit to saying that he would support any of those. If the Minister is not in a position to give us that information now, could he let us know if it is his intention to correspond with the committee to tell us his view on each of those 14 recommendations. It was a piece of work that took the committee and the clerk a considerable amount of time, and I think there are some very good suggestions in there which I hope the Minister would lift from it.

One of the issues I am increasingly concerned about is the smaller number of families who are expending considerably longer periods of time in emergency accommodation. By and

large, they are families with larger numbers of children. They could be Traveller or Roma families or just families which have larger than average numbers of children. We have a small number of families that will spend their fourth Christmas in emergency accommodation, and for some, it will be their third Christmas. Can the Minister tell us how many families are more than two, three, and four years in emergency accommodation? More importantly, is it not now time for some specific intervention, tailored to the family size, to try to get these families out of emergency accommodation, particularly given the difficulty that many local authorities have in both acquiring and producing sizeable four bedroom units?

The summary of social housing assessment is a very important report. I welcome its publication by the Housing Agency every year. It shows a year-on-year change of 3,000 households, that is, a decline of the number of families on the list of 3,000. What the report does not say as far as I can see, which it did say last year, is how many new households came onto the lists during the 12 months. I think it is fair to say that if the overall social housing support delivery, including real social housing and subsidised private rental tenancies, is in the order of 17,000 to 19,000 in that year, and there is only a reduction of 3,000 households, we may be seeing a significant increase in the level of new social housing demand on previous years. The reports of last year and the year before recorded approximately 14,000 new households on the list. The figure for this year is not there but it seems to me that we could be looking at something much more significant. I would appreciate if the Minister could give us any response to that.

I want to talk about the social housing output figures. My interest in them is not because I want to run out of here and misrepresent the Minister. I do think this committee has a legitimate right to track the targets and ask questions, particularly as to whether those targets will be met. In my commentary on this matter this morning on the radio, I made it very clear that we questioned this at this time last year when the Minister said he would deliver on his targets, and he did deliver on them. My one concern is that while the Department is ahead on acquisitions, similarly to this time last year it is behind on new builds and leases. It is in a similar position in terms of how behind it is on the new builds. The delivery rate is about 35% at the end of quarter 3, which is exactly the same as last year. The Minister is absolutely correct that by the end of quarter 4 last year the targets had been filled out. However, this year, the target is greater by 2,000 new builds than it was last year. The Minister has more visibility on this than we do. How confident is he that he is going to meet those targets by the end of the year? It is an important question and I would like to think that some of the pressure on the Minister and his officials does come from the work of this committee highlighting it.

I also think it is legitimate for us to ask questions breaking down the different aspects of the new build programme. I welcome any real social housing, no matter what delivery stream it comes through, including approved housing bodies, AHBs, turnkey, local authority new builds and acquisitions. However, it is concerning that despite the fact that we have some 31 local authorities, their portion of the new build still seems to be sluggish. It is more than it was in previous years but, for example, there are only about five large approved housing bodies delivering the vast bulk of AHB stock. I warmly welcome that stock. The reason many of us ask about the new build figure is that it should be significantly ahead of all the others, yet three and a half years into this plan it is still very sluggish. I am genuinely interested to know, within the local authority and AHB new builds, the number or percentage of turnkeys. I am not against turnkeys. I have a number of very significant turnkeys in my own constituency that are really valuable. None of those is the kind of turnkey the Minister described. They were all either near completion or on site when they were sold. I am not objecting to them. However, if local authorities are becoming over-reliant on turnkeys, that says something about their own output.

I am genuinely interested in teasing that out a little bit more.

I also want to talk about HAP and RAS. I have never argued that there should not be a rental subsidy. My concern is that the targets in Rebuilding Ireland have far too much rental subsidy and far too little real social housing. Over the period of Rebuilding Ireland, the percentage of rent supplement transfers as the overall HAP figure is about 23%. This year so far it is about 13%. The vast bulk of those are people who have not actually moved property. They have stayed in the one property but have moved from one rental subsidy to the other. Surely we should not be including them in what is presented to us as new tenancies. I am not trying to get into a row about playing the figures here but when the Department gives us the output figures at the end of the year, the impression is that these are all new things. If I am living in the same property and have just moved from rent supplement to HAP as the HAP scheme has advantages that rent supplement does not, it should not be suggested that this is something new in terms of the tenancy. I am also concerned about the impact of the growing levels of HAP tenancies on the rental market more generally. If we have had 66,935 HAP tenancies created since Rebuilding Ireland, that is a lot of rental stock taken out of standard rental. Has the Department done any assessment of the impact of such large levels of HAP on the rental market overall, rental prices, demand and so on? I am not arguing against rental subsidies. It is the disproportionate over-reliance on rental subsidies versus new stock.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank the members for their questions. On the frustration with things getting late, some of the delays are sometimes with me because I just have not had a chance to sit down and read the report before it is published because of other things that are happening in the Dáil or in the Seanad. The officials work incredibly diligently but sometimes the Minister himself can be a bit of a bottleneck in terms of getting things to the committee. It is not intentional. I want the members to have as much information as they think they need so that we can go through these things in as much detail as possible. I do not want information getting to the committee late. I will do better in that regard myself. On family homelessness and the recommendations, I met with officials after the committee had published its report and we went through the recommendations. I was also aware of what was coming because we were given early sight of the draft. My understanding was that I had corresponded but I will go back and look at that. I thought I had come back to the committee, if not with a full position on each of the recommendations, to give a timeline as to when we would. I will check that. If we have not, it is my fault, but my understanding is that it was in train. I have gone through the recommendations that were produced by the committee.

On the social housing assessment, there has generally been a 25% decrease since 2016. The Deputy is right to make the point which I also made in my opening statement that households are still coming on each year. Households are coming off for different reasons and other households are coming on. I do not have a figure for how many came on over the course of a 12-month period because it is just a snapshot in time. I do not think we did that earlier. I am not quite sure where-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I am sorry to cut across the Minister. I had raised this with John O'Connor and he pointed me to what effectively represents the additional households over a year in the last two reports. The figure is about 14,000 households. It is an approximation from a table that was in the last two housing needs assessments but that table is not in this report.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Is the Deputy speaking about the possibility of making an estimate based on two other figures?

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: No, it is a figure in the report. I will share it with the officials so we know what happened here.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I will come back to the Deputy on that in just a moment. I do not remember that. On our targeted delivery, they are high targets. They have increased again for this year by an extra 2,000 homes. It is very important that the targets are getting higher each year. Because they are programmed over the four quarters to build into the last quarter, as happened last year, new builds will catch up. The Deputy asked about my confidence that they will catch up again this year. I have high confidence that they will. In all these things, we recognise that we want the local authorities to be building the houses and doing the delivery, so they are independent of me. If we do not make it, it will not be due to a fault in the Department. It will be because something happened on the local authority side. That is not to shift the blame but just to recognise that we say we want local authorities delivering houses and if a local authority fails to deliver on its target, that is the local authority. Due to the work we are doing with local authorities to help them and because of the constant oversight that we have, I have high confidence we will reach our targets. I will be reporting on that in January. The Deputy used the phrase “sluggish growth”. In 2014, 400 homes were built for social housing and this year it is more than 6,000. I do not think that growth is sluggish. If we were operating in the private sector and achieving that kind of growth in housing delivery, it would be quite phenomenal. It is phenomenal in terms of what local authorities have done, coming from almost nothing to quite something indeed. It is an increase of 2,000 on last year which will increase again next year and continue increasing.

The breakdown on the turnkeys is just coming now. I will have it in a moment. On HAP, interestingly, the targets for build were lower until I increased the build target by 30%. I did increase the targets and we got the extra funding to increase them. In fact, the ratios might have been even worse. We will see that dependence on HAP coming down below 10,000 as the social housing stock increases above 12,000. We are going to shift away from that dependency but the initial build target under Rebuilding Ireland was lower and we increased it.

The Deputy is correct that some of the new HAPs are going to people who are on rent supplement but going from rent supplement to HAP means something different for the tenants involved because of the flexibility and supports they have. Unlike rent supplement, we believe it meets the household need as it is defined. Had we not done that with HAP, the tenants in question might have been out of housing altogether. While I take the Deputy’s point that such people are perhaps not leaving the property they were in, it would have been a different scenario for them had we not stepped in with HAP. We have always been clear and transparent about the percentage of HAPs that are going to people who are coming from rent supplement.

Work was done on the impact of HAP tenancies on the market. People in receipt of HAPs represent a small percentage of the overall rental sector. I am concerned that there might be too much of a concentration of HAPs in a particular area and what that might do to the local rental yield. We continue to look at that on a case-by-case basis. People have expressed concerns to me that all the new apartments that are coming online will be taken up by those in receipt of HAP. Those people have concerns about others who have housing insecurity but they are also concerned about getting homes for themselves. I have heard those points being made and it is something on which we are constantly keeping an eye. We also keep an eye on the percentage of HAP uplifts, the number of HAPs using the 20% flexibility option, or a portion thereof, and the homeless HAPs availing of the 50% option.

Fewer than 1,000 of the 6,500 homes that will be provided for social housing will happen

through the turnkey mechanism. I do not have a breakdown of those that were commissioned from plans versus those that might have been taken later on in the process. We tell local authorities not to compete with first-time buyers and we are quite clear on that.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: There has been nodding from the secretariat to indicate that we have not received correspondence on the report and it would be appreciated if we could get that soon.

The Minister did not respond to the question about long-term homeless families who have been without a home for two, three and four years.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I beg the Deputy's pardon.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I will make two other quick points. I used the word "sluggish" specifically about local authority new builds. I am not suggesting that turnkey or AHB new builds are in any way inferior, but there are concerns. Many of us expected that, at the beginning of social housing output, local authorities would be behind the curve because of capacity issues and all the rest of it. It was expected that as we get towards the end of Rebuilding Ireland, the proportion of local authority new builds would be much greater. I am genuinely concerned that 1,000 or 1,500 of the approximately 6,000 local authority builds is a small proportion. I am highlighting a concern not to deflect from the approximately 6,000 homes but to say that local authorities should be delivering a larger proportion. I will reflect on that.

The Minister of State, Deputy English, was with us recently discussing the report on Traveller accommodation. Many of us are very keen that the actions in that report progress as a matter of urgency next year. Will the Minister give his support and commitment to assisting the Minister of State so that whatever he brings forward will get through this House? Sinn Féin has committed to giving the Minister of State our support and this is an opportunity for the Minister to share his view of that particular issue.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Is there a committee meeting in January?

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: There is.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The Minister of State, Deputy English, is within my Department and we spoke before he appeared in front of the committee. I am fully aware of what his intentions are, he has my full support and there is no question on that.

We will follow up on getting correspondence to the committee and I apologise for that omission.

It is interesting to consider the tables in more detail. The programme for Rebuilding Ireland recognised that local authorities would be slower off the mark because they did not have the capacity. I mentioned in my opening statement that more than 700 new posts have been sanctioned, which means there are now more than 3,000 local authority staff working in this area. The profile for delivery gets better for local authorities towards the end of Rebuilding Ireland. One of the tables shows that when the composition of the builds is broken down, local authorities will deliver the majority of them. We will not see the 2:1 ratio this year but it will not be far from that. By the end of Rebuilding Ireland, what local authorities will have done will be impressive. Things do not stop with Rebuilding Ireland and there is not a cliff edge at the end of 2021. At that point, all local authorities will have the afterburners going on housing delivery. The housing delivery office will at that stage have spent two years with local authorities, have

new guidance confirmed for the external layout for social housing and have the internal specifications. New protocols will have been agreed on procurement and much more will happen in respect of certain local authorities implementing clustering initiatives in which they have expertise. There will be an impressive pipeline under the national development plan. I want to make sure that housing building and delivery are hardwired into local authorities so that if someone was to come in after me and try and unpick that in any way, they would find it impossible. That is what we need to make sure we do so we do not repeat mistakes that were made in the past.

I will turn to families in emergency accommodation. We still have an issue whereby we are getting better data in Dublin than in the regions, although there is much greater proportion of families in emergency accommodation than in the regions. For those in Dublin, the majority of families have been in emergency accommodation for 12 months or less. Approximately 187 families have been in emergency accommodation for between 12 and 18 months, 146 families have been in emergency accommodation between 18 and 24 months and 186 families have been in emergency accommodation for two years or more.

The Deputy is correct that it is more difficult to house larger families. I said in response to Senator Murnane O'Connor that a number of families who are now in emergency accommodation, and particularly those who have been there for two years or longer, have complex backgrounds that meant the families ended up in emergency accommodation and have been unable to get out. In some cases, they have particular and fundamental needs that are not just about meeting the rent. Those people require much more dedicated support to ensure that, as they move out of emergency accommodation and into a home, they will stay in that home.

There was talk about getting families out of emergency accommodation when Deputy Coveney was the relevant Minister and the intention was not to get all families out of emergency accommodation within a year because he recognised at the time that some families had much more complex needs that would take more time to be resolved. That continues to be the case, particular for families who have been in emergency accommodation for longer than 24 months. As I said earlier, the majority of families have been in emergency accommodation for less than 12 months and those figures are always improving, but particularly so in the past year because of the additional houses that we have available to us through delivery across the different streams.

Chairman: We have 12 minutes left according to our schedule. I have some questions myself but it is the season of goodwill. Deputy Boyd Barrett is a guest who cares deeply about this issue, so he will have five minutes.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will dispense with a couple of red herrings, although I acknowledge that the Minister, his staff and local authority workers are working hard on this issue. Things are happening but the problem, to be clear, is that Rebuilding Ireland is flawed because it relies, by a ratio of 3:1, on the private sector to build social housing and is, therefore, destined to fail. That is my argument, to be clear.

A person sent me a text message this week and asked me to read it out. I will redact the name of the person and the homeless hub that she is in.

Hi Richard, my name is ... I dealt with you nearly three years back. I was on "The Big Picture - Homelessness". Anyway I spoke with someone today and told me to get on to you about my story. So since I met you last, I've had two more children born into homelessness. Unfortunate, with a broken heart as a type this, my son passed away in the hub. They moved us out after it happened to an apartment that was run temporary by Peter McVerry.

My daughter then lost the top of her finger because there were big heavy fire doors that slam in a split second. The managers came up to check on the doors where they broke. They were supposed to slow down before closing, but these, they didn't so then they moved us after back into a family hub, one bedroom, five of us living there, and there is more to the story if I could meet. I want people to know this, I want to get my story heard for what the Government are putting my families through. The council have even agreed I am homeless all my life, which is 23 years.

That is shocking and unacceptable. None of us can claim that things are working if that is happening.

As that lady indicated, she came to me three years ago and we fought to get her into a hub. She is still there and she has had two children born into homelessness. One passed away in that situation. It is just unacceptable. That story is repeated, to a greater or lesser degree, for thousands of women and families in this country. I wanted to say that first.

In Dún Laoghaire, the picture is grim in the extreme, because we have the highest rents and the highest house prices. Whatever else the Minister wants to say about targets, it is not happening in Dún Laoghaire. In the official report of the council, the target for build, acquisition and leasing for 2019 is 208. There are 4,300 families on the housing list. The target for 2019 was 208 and, to date, it has delivered 87. It said it will get another 21 under those categories by the end of the year. It will get to just over half of its target. That target is pathetic when one considers the 4,300 families on the housing list.

I have gone on and on about the number of people who have been whacked off the list in that period because their earnings inched marginally above the income threshold, which the Minister has repeatedly refused to increase despite being pestered by me and others for two years. That has reduced the number on the list, to some extent, but not the reality of those facing the housing crisis.

I have pointed out to the Minister that under the category "build" the number of council houses to be completed in 2020 in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, which was pathetic and under target in 2019, will be two. This is from official documents. If I include AHBs, as the Minister is so keen that I do, that figure goes to 13. This is not working and it is not acceptable. Seven or eight years ago, before the Minister came into office, I publicly raised the issue of Shanganagh. I pleaded then that council houses be built on that site but not a sod has been turned. The reason is that the Minister insists on a mix, the LDA and on everything, except building council houses on land that is ours. That this is not acceptable.

I refer to tenants, and I raise this matter again. The tenants in St. Helen's Court in Dún Laoghaire, which was bought from NAMA by vulture funds, are facing the fourth effort by those vulture funds to evict them, and the Minister's Government made the decision to sell it to those funds. Threshold has been helping the tenants, as have I, and it believes that this time we have run out of rope. Ten of the tenants have left already because they have had enough and those ten units have sat empty for about a year and a half. They are directly across the road from my office. Of the other ten tenants, eight of them face the likelihood of eviction immediately, because to get around the Tyrrelstown amendment, they are evicting eight. They will almost certainly get away with it unless something exceptional happens with the RTB, which we doubt.

If the Anti-Evictions Bill 2018, which was passed by the Dáil, had been supported by the Government and had become law, those people would still be in their homes. That is a fact.

This is because the Minister allows vulture funds to evict people on grounds of sale. Does he not think that he should change his attitude on that issue? If he does not, what does he propose to say to those tenants? I want to go back to them and say that the Minister said this is the answer to their problem. However, at the moment, they are facing is homelessness in the new year because there is nowhere else in Dún Laoghaire for them to go.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett, and call the Minister.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank the Deputy for his contribution. When he says the plan is flawed, he is saying that, as he admitted, from an ideological point of view. He thinks it is flawed because it is over-reliant on the private sector. It is not that the plan is flawed in terms of increasing the output to the degree that it will increase it - for example, by increasing the stock of social housing by more than 50,000 homes, which it will do, or getting 125,000 new homes by the end of 2021. It is not flawed in those respects. Deputy Boyd Barrett is saying it is flawed based on how much it is weighted towards the private sector. What I would say to the Deputy on that, although again it is an ideological position, is that the social housing programme, which is under way and which will increase the stock by 50,000 homes, has not been seen in decades in this country. We need to provide housing for everybody in this country, including social and affordable and private housing. We have responsibilities to every one of our citizens and that is what the plan intends to meet.

Stories in this crisis are very important. We hear a lot of stories and we are moved by them. The story Deputy Boyd Barrett told is horrific. It is very hard to imagine what that family is going through at the moment. I do not know all the details of the story. I am not going to seek to undermine it in any way. It is very difficult to hear those stories. However, reasoning from the basis of stories, one story or a number of stories, does not undermine the evidence that we have for the supports that are being given. I refer to the stories of the 2,500 people in emergency accommodation since I came into office, and the stories of the more than 12,000 households that have exited homelessness since I came into office. There are lots of stories in this.

There is also lots of evidence of how our plan is working. The plan is not finished. The problem is not solved. There are still huge challenges out there. The housing sector is not fixed. We were very honest about this. We said it would take five years to get from almost nowhere to a point where we had delivered more than 100,000 homes. In tandem with that we have dramatically reformed our rental laws, changed the types of homes we are building, and brought about a new vision for housing delivery that was planning-led rather than developer-led. All of those things are now happening or are in train. They are all part of this plan that we have.

House prices are falling in Dún Laoghaire, because of the increase in supply that is happening generally. Cherrywood will deliver about 9,000 new houses. They put in all the infrastructure first. The parks, the football field and the AstroTurf facilities are there. Houses are now being built and it will have a huge impact on that area. Enniskerry Road, our first cost-rental scheme is being built, with apartments to rent from €1,200. On Shanganagh, the planning permission will go in in January, but even before then, the LDA will publish what it intends to submit as part of its transparency initiative, because it is the State developer. We are going to see social and affordable houses there. For the people who live there, that is going to be a huge benefit for them as well.

In terms of Dún Laoghaire's actual targets, it has 658 homes in its pipeline for build at the moment. It has delivered 330 new build homes to date. The social housing list is falling in Dún Laoghaire to just over 2,600. Progress is being made in Dún Laoghaire. As the Deputy knows,

Dún Laoghaire is a very particular area in terms of affordability issues, so we have to do more there to drive affordability. We have to make sure people do not get in the way of delivery in terms of objecting to housing.

Tenancy laws are there to protect tenants. Threshold is Government-funded and is there to help tenants, as is the RTB. This is not to prejudge the outcome of particular cases, but as I said not everything is perfect. I have been very open about considering every solution put to me, including the anti-evictions Bill. I had a number of round-table discussions with the NGOs on this, including the CEOs of the NGOs. The Taoiseach was also involved in those discussions. We have looked at this Bill. First and foremost, it is unconstitutional so we cannot get around that. I cannot get around being told by the Attorney General that a Bill is unconstitutional. The only way to do so is by way of a referendum.

Deputy Mick Barry: Has the Attorney General told the Minister that?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Yes. Even if it was not unconstitutional, I would make the point that it would not solve the problem. It would only displace the problem. I will explain to Deputy Barry how it would displace the problem. What would happen is people would not be able to sell their homes and they would not be able to buy homes. There would still be new people without anywhere to live, if people were frozen in the accommodation they were in. Even if one restricted it more, as has been proposed by some NGOs, and said that people would have to remain *in situ* until the home was sold, then all one would be doing would be forcing the new person buying to evict them so they could live in the home they bought. None of these things solves the problem. They just displace it or move it to a different part of the housing sector.

Chairman: I am conscious that it is 12 noon, which was the proposed time for the meeting to end. It has come to my attention that the room is available for longer than we had believed. If the Minister is available and if it is agreeable to the committee, we might proceed for another 15 minutes or thereabouts to get a second round of questions in.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I can give the committee 15 minutes. I am in the Seanad later with the Housing (Regulation of Approved Housing Bodies) Bill 2019. I am also with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on another issue. I have other things on, but I can give a few more minutes.

Chairman: I appreciate that. If the committee is agreeable, we will continue for another 15 minutes. Is that agreed? Agreed. I have two members for the second round of questioning. I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have two one-line questions for the Minister. If the Constitution needs to be changed to pass a Bill like that, why did the Minister oppose a Bill that we brought forward in 2017 to change the Constitution, precisely to facilitate that? The Constitution should be changed in order to ensure that property rights do not supersede the right of people to be housed. To clarify what the Minister said, did he say the Attorney General has given him written advice to the effect that the anti-evictions Bill would be unconstitutional?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: On the constitutional change, the point remains that it would not have solved the problem. I do not have the Bill in front of me, and there have been a few pieces of legislation or proposals put to me around this whole area of tenants' rights on when a property is for sale or on whether it can be sold at all. I do not want to be too exact, but from memory it was not just that it was unconstitutional. It would not have solved the problem for

the reasons I outlined. It has a displacement effect. It does not get us where we need to go.

There is a balance of rights in the Constitution between individual property rights and the public good. We have been stretching those rights when it comes to things like the vacant site levy and other measures we have brought in around tenant protection, and things like that. We have been constantly stretching those rights in favour of the public good versus individual property rights. I have not let someone say individual property rights deter us from a course we need to take.

On written advice from the Attorney General, it would depend on the mechanism by which the Deputy put the Bill to me and whether I have to take a memo to Cabinet, circumstances in which we would get observations from the Attorney General. However, I know straight up, because we have looked at this issue a few times, that the first barrier is constitutionality. It arose with the anti-evictions Bill and the tenants *in situ* Bill. The tenants *in situ* Bill was less severe than the anti-evictions Bill, but both failed the constitutionality test when they were explored. It would depend on whether it was a Private Members' Bill and whether I brought a memo to Cabinet.

Chairman: I am conscious three members wish to ask questions and we have 12 minutes remaining. They may have two minutes each.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: We all know many AHBs are building to a great standard, and we welcome them. The biggest issue is the lack of builds by local authorities and of affordable housing. Carlow's HAP is €559 and if a person has evidence of income, there is that leniency of 20%. It is not right that houses for rent in Carlow are now between €1,000 and €1,100. Many people are falling into the poverty trap because of it in that they cannot afford to pay the extra. As the Minister knows, people can pay the extra to the landlord, and he needs to look at that. Can I have an update on the mortgage to rent scheme?

The Minister and his Department need to look at RAS. A person can go onto the local authority housing list if he or she was on RAS since before 2011. There are people who do not want to be on RAS. They should be given the chance to come off it. In terms of the adaptation grants of €6,000, the Minister needs to look at that. There are people who cannot afford it. Some €6,000 is the cut-off point for a bathroom adaptation grant. Many of the prices are now much more expensive than that. Will the Minister and his Department consider giving extra funding?

Did the Department write to all the local authorities asking for an economic statement of need? Did every authority write back? Someone mentioned it to me, and I wondered if it was true. What answers were received, and which local authorities applied?

The Minister said he was streamlining more CPO powers. What is the timescale for that? I refer to the Rebuilding Ireland home loan, which is working well. Is there funding set aside for it next year?

Chairman: That was a sensational use of two minutes. The Senator crammed in everything she possibly could.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I did my best.

Chairman: The Minister will answer as many as he can. It might be best if he provided written supplementary answers.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I can do that Chair. I always appreciate our engagements. The throwaway line I hear so often is that Rebuilding Ireland is not working and yet in her contribution, the Senator pointed to the Rebuilding Ireland home loan, which is great and is working-----

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: That is working.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Housing bodies and what they are doing come under Rebuilding Ireland. We have to get to a point in our public debate where we recognise what is working and where we can do better. That is what I am saying.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: All these other things are not working.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: It is important that we, as public representatives, make a balanced contribution or else the public will lose faith in the system altogether.

On Carlow, HAP and the uplift, or the additional payment that may be made, HAP is only done after a fair assessment of a tenant's ability to meet the HAP payment and any additional payment that might be made. What we do not want people to do is to engage in a HAP lease arrangement and fall into arrears, because that is not going to help anyone. I have spoken to the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty, about arrears in those types of situations, so supports are there. It is obviously cheaper for the State to deal with it at that point in time rather than later on. If one looks at it from a financial point of view, it makes sense for the State. Obviously from the human need and health point of view, it makes much more sense for the individual in terms of better care and not being at risk of homelessness or falling into homelessness.

On mortgage to rent, at a high level, more than 600 mortgage to rent homes have been secured. It is demand-led, and there are roughly 1,000 in the pipeline. We have seen some big movements in the last six months, in particular, in terms of new players coming into this space, which is great. It keeps people in their homes.

There have been some changes in regard to RAS and there has been a wind down of it with people moving to HAP. There is an obligation on local authorities to ensure they are meeting the targets they have and that supports are being put in place. HAP is available in each local authority area.

I think 26 local authorities completed an economic assessments in regard to affordability and need, with others still to do so.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Right.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: When we did our first call for the serviced sites fund it was based on the areas that were most exposed in terms of affordability. The second call went further and what we want to do is have the scheme open and have local authorities come forward as they have plans. They will need to have their economic assessments done if that is to happen.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I ask the Minister to come back to us with some information on that.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Sure. I cannot see from my notes if Carlow did it-----

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I do not think it did. I will come back to the Minister on it.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: We will check on Carlow and see what has happened there.

On CPO, I think I mentioned recently in the Chamber that there is a piece of work that needs to be done on it. Some of our CPO law is based on legislation that predates the foundation of the State. It is antiquated. It is in a number of different legislative vehicles. There is a piece of work that needs to be done to bring it together and to streamline it. CPO powers are there for local authorities. Certain local authorities are better than others in that regard. We do not want necessarily to get the property but rather we want to get it back into use. The threat of CPO can be more effective there. Sometimes when we look at pure CPO numbers, they do not tell us what has happened in terms of the increase in stock as a result of a CPO process or CPO threat.

Chairman: The Senator's time is up.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister.

Chairman: I call Deputy Barry.

Deputy Mick Barry: I thank Deputy Casey for allowing me to jump him in the queue, so to speak. The Anti-Evictions Bill 2018 is my Bill. The key provisions include a ban eviction on grounds of sale of property, which is the position in Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, and also on grounds of renovations, or so-called "reno-victions". There is no doubt, as Deputy Boyd Barrett said, that it has the potential to save thousands of people from being evicted into homelessness.

When the Minister was questioned on this by Deputy Boyd Barrett he was crystal-clear that the Attorney General had advised him that the Bill was unconstitutional. However, when he was questioned a second time, his answer was considerably vaguer than that. The Minister indicated he had not given him a ruling in writing-----

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: No, I did not.

Deputy Mick Barry: -----that it was unconstitutional.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: No, I did not.

Deputy Mick Barry: If the Minister can clarify that-----

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I dispute that-----

Deputy Mick Barry: Do we have it in writing from the Attorney General that it is unconstitutional? If we do not have it in writing, has he given a definitive statement to the Cabinet or to the Minister, or is it a little less vague than that? Could we clarify the position?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: What I said in my reply was that it would depend on the vehicle in which the Bill was brought forward. If it was brought forward as a Private Members' Bill, for example, I would had to have brought a memo to Cabinet. In bringing a memo to Cabinet, I would have to seek observations from the Attorney General on legal issues around a Bill, or a position on constitutional issues. That was the point I made to Deputy Boyd Barrett. We have written legal advice on the constitutionality of an anti-eviction mechanism being introduced, where one would not allow someone to be evicted from a property based on reasons of sale. A further point I made to Deputy Boyd Barrett, and Deputy Barry raised it in terms of the other element of that Bill, was on not being allowed to evict someone because the property was going to be renovated. That is bad policy. It is potentially dangerous for tenants where properties

need substantial renovation. Even if it were constitutional, it would not be something I could stand over from a policy point of view because it would put tenants at risk.

Chairman: To be fair to Deputy Casey, Deputy Barry jumped him in the queue. We only have four minutes.

Deputy Mick Barry: I have one very brief supplementary question. It was brought forward in the Dáil as a Private Members' Bill. There is a difference between saying there is an issue with an anti-eviction mechanism and saying, which the Minister said to the committee, the Attorney General said specifically in relation to this Bill that it would be unconstitutional. It seems the Minister is saying it is a little less than that now.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: No. I am 100% certain the Attorney General told me that. What I cannot be clear on is whether I have it in writing, because I cannot remember the mechanism. The Deputy is clarifying it for me now, but he is asking me to speak from memory on a Bill he brought forward in 2017. That is a dangerous thing to do in a committee. We are meant to be reviewing Rebuilding Ireland.

Deputy Mick Barry: It is a Bill that would prevent thousands of people from being evicted into homelessness in the middle of a homelessness crisis-----

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Yes, but the Deputy is asking me about a Cabinet meeting from two years ago.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Minister should be well aware-----

Chairman: Deputy Barry has made his point.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: This is meant to be an opportunity for us, as parliamentarians,-----

Deputy Mick Barry: I am looking for a straight answer.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: -----to go through the details of Rebuilding Ireland. Deputy Barry likes to create little theatre shows, however, which are frustrating. It is clearly unconstitutional. One does not need to be a constitutional lawyer to know that. That is why I was able to say it was unconstitutional when the Deputy asked me. I know for certain because I have discussed these issues at length with the Attorney General on a number of occasions, around what the Constitution allows us to do when it comes to property rights, whether in respect of the vacant site levy or something like the Deputy's Bill. I have had a number of conversations with the Attorney General on this. The Deputy should not sit here and try to suggest that I am not even thinking about these issues, even though we are in a crisis, and that they are not important. That is the theatre aspect of this. I would like to thank Deputy Casey for giving the Deputy time to speak.

Chairman: Thank you, Minister. I call Deputy Casey.

Deputy Pat Casey: I mentioned the off-balance sheet model, but I did not expand on it. The concern is looking ahead four or five years and the fact that any debt is part of the fiscal space. This morning we heard an announcement from Circle Voluntary Housing Association about a new public private partnership process in relation to the delivery of social housing and investment. I do not know the details of it. If, for example, each of the approved housing bodies, AHBs, received €100 million of private financing tomorrow morning, which is €1.4 million

or €1.3 million, that would form part of the fiscal space. Are we then constrained by trying to deliver through the approved housing bodies?

I have two other comments to make. On the over 65s, and I know it is a very small figure, there is a trend here. We are seeing an increase, year on year. In the summary on social housing, there is also an increase in respect of the over 60s. It is now at 10%. Is this something we should be beginning to be slightly concerned about?

I will not get into the four stage process. I will leave it for another day.

Chairman: Thank you, Deputy Casey. I call the Minister.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I had understood that Deputy Casey had given up his speaking time to Deputy Barry. I am glad he got in and asked me some questions about what we are trying to do in Rebuilding Ireland. On the off-balance sheet issue for housing bodies, I met the Irish Council for Social Housing, ICSH, earlier in this term and I met the Housing Alliance, which represents the large tier 3 housing bodies, I think, in October of this year. What we have is a EUROSTAT decision which, as the Deputy knows, is a classification issue for balance sheet purposes. We do not want that to interfere with delivery from the housing bodies, and I have made a commitment that it will not. To date, the classification issue around it, in terms of the accounting treatment, has been led by the Department of Finance. My understanding from the Department of Finance is that even if one was to see such a development - we want to see more private finance coming in through housing bodies for housing delivery - the impact on the fiscal space would be almost negligible, even at the amounts the Deputy is talking about. However, we want to get through this in the way the UK got through this, which was a reclassification of the balance sheet.

I made a commitment to the Housing Alliance during those meetings that we would try to progress some of the proposals it brought to the table in terms of opinions it has around the interpretation the CSO has made, and to see if we can make progress with the CSO. We are trying to hit this on two fronts as a result of those engagements we had in the last couple of months. It will not impact on the delivery by housing bodies in terms of our social housing targets under Rebuilding Ireland.

Chairman: Thank you very much Minister.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Was there another question about over 65s?

Deputy Pat Casey: There is a trend and I am concerned.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: It is a concern, and what it points to is people who find themselves in a precarious housing situation where they are no longer able to earn an income. A big factor in that is the high rents, particularly in places like Dublin. People have been squeezed out of the rental sector because they have got a fixed income with a pension, and they have not been able to keep up with the rent inflation. That is why we have to hammer rent inflation down and increase supply. We are also looking to make sure the accommodation that is being brought onstream by local authorities is meeting the needs in terms of elderly accommodation. The Minister of State, Deputy English, and the Minister of State, Deputy Daly, also have a strategy with about 40 action points for elderly housing and more elderly appropriate housing, and that includes supported housing. There is stuff happening in that space, but I have the same concerns as Deputy Casey because I have seen that trend.

Chairman: Thank you very much, Minister.

On a housekeeping matter, an economist has been seconded to the committee to do some very important scoping work with regard to current expenditure. The individual has been in touch with the Department. We are now a month into this process but unfortunately we have not managed to have a designated liaison person assigned to that economist who was seconded to us. I would appreciate it if the Minister would undertake to try to expedite this because we will not have this resource forever and it is worthwhile work.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Chairman, I beg your pardon that we have not been back to you. The Secretary General has assured me that we will be back in the next couple of weeks. As everyone knows, we have been working flat out over this last period. A couple of things came up from a party that amazingly is not here again today. That took a bit of the focus away last week, but we will revert to you on that in the next couple of weeks.

Chairman: I would appreciate that. Thank you all for your time today.

The joint committee adjourned at 12.20 p.m. *sine die*.