

"I had to move school. I miss my old friends. I don't like where I am. It's scary. It's not fun and I can't play outside. I want to go home." Child, nine

Introduction

Barnardos is seriously concerned about the scale of the housing crisis now facing many low income families particularly those reliant on social welfare. Many children are experiencing their childhood in overcrowded, unsuitable and insecure accommodation which is affecting their social, emotional and educational development. A greater supply of housing across all tenures must be provided and emergency accommodation significantly enhanced to meet the needs of families.

Context

The following statistics outline the key figures relating to housing shortages, which are driving up rental prices and subsequently leading families to live in emergency accommodation and become homeless.

- Property rents have risen by on average 9% since 2013, up 14% in Dublin city centre (Daft.ie).
- There were 10,000 rental properties advertised in Dublin in the first four months of 2014, compared with 18,000 in the same four-month period in 2012 (Daft.ie).
- In 2006, more than 93,000 housing units were completed across the country. The corresponding figure for 2013 was 8,301 - a reduction of 91%.
- The number of households on the social housing list rose to 64,579 compared to 45,417 in May 2013, an average increase of 42% across the country (Irish Times, 19th May 2014).
- More than 1,200 adult in emergency accommodation (excluding hotels) on any given night (Dublin Region Homeless Executive).
- 142 families living in hotel accommodation (Dublin Region Homeless Executive).
- The number of families with children in emergency accommodation is increasing steadily. In November 2013, there were 128 adults with children in emergency accommodation (Dublin Region Homeless Executive).
- Rough sleeping in Dublin city centre has risen by 200% since January, and is up three fold on this time last year (Dublin Simon Community).

Private rented accommodation

For the 77,000 people who rely on rent supplement to assist with their housing costs the housing crisis is becoming unbearable for a number of reasons. These include;

- Landlords being unwilling to accept rent supplement tenants when other tenants are available. This discrimination appears to be widespread across the country. Subsequently there is a real shortage of

appropriate accommodation and overcrowding is common. There are no homes available when family size gets bigger, in one case a family of 11 is living in a three bed house.

- Landlords are increasing the rent levels due to demand yet the rent supplement levels received fall far short of this and tenants are unable to make up the difference. They can fall into arrears and end up being evicted. The rent supplement levels were reviewed by the Department of Social Protection in July 2013 but have not kept pace with rising rents. For example a lone parent and two children are given a max amount of €550, yet one bedroom apartments are going for €600 with the suitable option of a three bed house averaging at €750/€800 which is an impossible amount to make up every month for families on social welfare.
- Substandard accommodation is widespread as the landlord can be slow to do repairs to property as he knows families will be hard pressed to find alternative accommodation. Issues of broken heating or damp are common. The inspection of properties rests with each local authority and as a result monitoring standards are very patchy across the country.

Emergency accommodation

The present provision of emergency accommodation is totally unsuitable for family life. Unfortunately families are staying in this type of accommodation much longer than previously and in some cases up to a year given the challenges they face in accessing the private rented sector with rent supplement assistance.

These facilities can also include B&B accommodation and hotel accommodation which are far away from their original locality and away from their established support networks. These shared facilities mean there are no storage places for family groceries, toys, schoolbooks or personal effects. There are no play spaces and families are often mixed with other families or single adults and subsequently exposed to a range of adult behaviour that can be inappropriate, aggressive and illegal. In reality families can go from living in two or three bedroomed homes to living in one hotel room which is over crowded with no facilities to cook or clean. In some cases families are split up as some shelters do not accept boys over 12 years and in some B&Bs families need to be out of the property by 10am each day.

Families can feel trapped in emergency accommodation as they are unable to save for a month's deposit if they manage to find a landlord willing to accept rent supplement tenants. Or they are unable to go onto the social housing list as they may have been evicted due to behavioural problems and have antisocial orders against them. This further isolates children from the necessary supports and interventions that could help them to change behaviour.

Social housing

The serious dearth of social housing across the country has led to lengthy waiting lists and families' lives being put on pause while they wait for suitable accommodation to meet their family needs. As a result families are struggling to cope with poor conditions, overcrowding e.g. two bedrooms for families with two or more children, meaning boys and girls sharing rooms or children sharing with parent/s for longer than appropriate and antisocial behaviour on estates especially those where houses have been boarded up. The lengthy waiting times are making families homeless and costing the State more money as crisis services are being used to plug the gap left by the lack of social housing.

Impact on the family

The inability for parents to make their house a home for their family has far reaching consequences on the family unit. It can lead to strained relationships and conflict between parents as they struggle with the potential of becoming homeless. This can be so overwhelming that it undermines their ability to focus on meeting the other needs of their children. Such strain and stress affects mental health and can lead to feelings of hopelessness and isolation. Living in emergency accommodation often prevents families continuing their links with key social supports due to poor transport

or high associated costs. This can mean children missing key health or developmental checks, failing to attend speech and language therapy or other crucial supports or having poor attendance in school. Overall, a housing crisis has a significantly adverse affect on the children and family.

Living in overcrowded accommodation means having no personal space as children share bedrooms with multiple siblings or having to sleep on the sofa. There is no space do homework or play indoors or outdoors resulting in poor stimulation. It affects their health, education and social skills. Families can be reluctant to maintain the property as they hope to be moving soon which means the housing standards continue to slip.

For families who experience frequent moves, it is hugely unsettling on the child as they move schools / preschools and friendship groups. They experience low self esteem and anxiety coping with the uncertainty and sensing the strain it is imposing on their parent(s). This strain is also affecting some parents' ability to parent. A number of Barnardos' staff commented that unsuitable accommodation and parents' struggle to meet childrens' needs as a result of their housing issues have ended up with child welfare referrals being made to Tusla. As one project worker put it: "One part of the State is failing these families, and then another, the Child and Family Agency, is having to go in and pick up the pieces with family support. It's awful to watch because you know it's costing everyone more, both in terms of the impact it's having on children and parents and the financial cost to the State."

"One teenager reports she has not unpacked from the previous move four months ago as her mum and her have moved three times in the last year." Barnardos Project Worker.

"There needs to be more understanding of the impact of cuts on families and the fact that rising rent and a lack of social housing is putting more and more strain on families." Barnardos Project Worker

"I've seen mums go back to violent relationships because when it was time to move on from the refuge they just couldn't afford private rented accommodation and the housing waiting list was too long. It was go back or become homeless." Barnardos Project Worker

Government response

With regard to private rented accommodation, the Department of Social Protection has committed €344 million for rent supplement in 2014 and says that although a rent review was conducted it continues to monitor trends to determine the impact on rent supplement recipients (Parliamentary Question, 14 May 2014). However, their long term aim is to return rent supplement to its original purpose of a short term income support. In July 2013 the Government approved the introduction of the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). Under HAP, responsibility for recipients of rent supplement with a long term housing need will transfer from the Department of Social Protection to local authorities. Officials in the Department are working closely with those in the lead Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, in piloting HAP in Limerick City and County Council with further roll out to a further six selected local authorities during the year.

Department of Environment announced last Tuesday 13 May 2014 an additional €50m to be invested in capital expenditure on top of that already committed to in Budget 2014. This extra funding will be split accordingly:

- An additional €20m to bring long term vacant units back into beneficial use. This is in addition to the €15m the Minister announced in April;
- An additional €20m for the construction of mainstream social housing in local authorities with the largest housing need. This is in addition to the €68m investment the Minister announced in March;
- A €10m boost to funding for people with a special housing need, with a particular focus on the construction and refurbishment of units for people who are homeless.

The Government also launched its *Construction 2020* strategy which aims to tackle the housing crisis and create 60,000 new construction jobs. It has been criticised for being aspirational but very short on detail. Particularly there is an absence on identifying clear lines of responsibility to implement the plan; little identification of who is accountable or how things will be measured and who will police the endeavour. Given its long term perspective it will do little to ease the current problems in the short term.

Recommendations:

Barnardos believes the following measures must be undertaken immediately to address the current issues and prevent the housing crisis from escalating:

Emergency accommodation

- End the practice of housing families requiring emergency accommodation in B&Bs and hotels. The costs are prohibitive and the venues totally unsuitable for children. There is a strong need to diversify and improve current emergency accommodation provision to meet the needs of families. Aligned to this is the need for stronger links between the Child and Family Agency and staff in emergency accommodation as they are ill-equipped to handle any child protection concerns.
- When families are placed in emergency accommodation, this should be as close as possible to their communities of origin to enable their children to have continuity of relationships with their school or pre-school, other services, friends and relatives. It also allow parents to have continuity of relationship with their support services and support networks and removes the additional financial and emotional strain of travelling long distances to services or else the disruption of changing services.
- Families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless should have a Key Worker assigned from the agency most appropriate to their overall needs. The role of the Key Worker should be to coordinate a cross agency support plan to the family and support families to find their way through the system, ensuring families have access to the range of services they need in a planned and integrated fashion. This will have the potential to prevent homelessness or lessen the period of time the family are homeless. It will also mean that when they obtain housing, the range of supports they need will be in place and the likelihood of them becoming homeless again will be significantly lessened.

Private rented accommodation

- Assess and roll out the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) as a matter of urgency to support families struggling to find or stay in appropriate private rented accommodation.
- Address the discrimination towards rent supplement tenants by fully resourcing the Private Residential Tenancy Board to intervene on behalf of individual families and advise Government on policy to prevent these situations arising in future. The Private Residential Tenancies Board has had significant staff cuts which has had an impact on its effectiveness across its wide remit.
- Introduce rent controls to stabilise the market and ensure rent prices rise at modest rates in line with inflation. It would result in tenants in the private rented sector living in a more stable community and having a better quality of life. It is a feature in many European states where renting is seen as a viable long term option (Dail Debate, 14 May).
- Improve standards of private rented accommodation by establishing a certification system whereby landlords seeking to lease a property would have to have a certificate stating the property is of sufficient quality and compliant with the legislative standards. Local authorities must be resourced to monitor and enforce standards across the private rented sector.

Social housing

- Expedite the construction of social housing to make inroads into the waiting lists – approximately 10,000 new housing units need to be provided on an annual basis (Threshold, 2013).