

Family Homelessness in Ireland – Current Picture



By **Dr Niall Muldoon**, Ombudsman for Children, Ireland

Ireland is currently dealing with thousands of children living in emergency accommodation and experiencing significant impacts on their rights and wellbeing. The Ombudsman for Children calls for a child-centred, cross-government approach focused on prevention, stronger support in emergency accommodation, and accelerated exits from homelessness.

There are currently 5,659 homeless children in Ireland. That's 5,659 children whose young lives will be irrevocably impacted by this experience. For some, it might only be for a short period of time spent in emergency accommodation or even on a relative's couch. But for other children, they find themselves spending months or even years without a permanent place to call home. Official figures show there were 734 families in emergency accommodation in Ireland for up to six months at the start of this year, while just under 600 have spent more than two years there.

For a country as well off economically as Ireland, this is nothing short of a national scandal.

The impact of homelessness and unstable living conditions on children is catastrophic. It affects every aspect of their lives; education, wellbeing and self-development. It also has a monumental impact on their ability to access services and supports.

"A new way of thinking is needed from Government. The State needs to move away from prioritising financial interests that view housing as a commodity, and instead recognise it as a social good, offering children and families a secure place to live in dignity."

Child and family homelessness is an issue that my Office has been highlighting consistently as far back as 2012, and sadly since then, the problem has grown exponentially. In 2019, we carried out a consultation with children² around their experience of living in Family Hubs³, speaking with over 70 children (and their parents) aged 1 to 17 years old. Space, privacy, noise, not being able to have visitors, feelings of shame and embarrassment, were all issues raised by the children who talked to us.

It is exasperating for me to repeatedly have to make these points, but it must be said again and again: even short-term exposure to homelessness can have a lifelong impact on children. It is not just about a child's right to a home; it impacts their right to education, health, play and recreation. Children have told us what it is like to share a room with their parents and siblings, what it is like to go to school from homelessness accommodation, to study and do homework.

We began that consultation when there were around 2,500

children in emergency accommodation. Fast forward seven years and that figure has more than doubled. But we knew as far back as 2017, that a lot of families were falling into homelessness simply because of economic reasons allied with poor Government policies - such as limited security of tenure for renters. Policies that outsourced all housing supplies to private enterprises and the simultaneous move in philosophy from Government to "leave it to the market" - where the Government allowed the private sector to set the prices and Government would accept it. But this way of working was essentially ignoring huge swathes of families who had only limited resources.

Before this, and over many decades from the Second World War onwards, the Irish state consistently built social housing locally to cater for and care for those we knew to be in need. That social contract was torn apart following the economic crash of 2008 and despite numerous warnings - no Government since then has been prepared to return to that way of working.

As Ombudsman for Children, I have made recommendations, met with Ministers and officials, but still the number of children who are living in homeless accommodation continues to grow.

Since about 2018, we have been pushing for successive Governments to recognise that Child and Family Homelessness requires different tactics and strategies in order to:

- Prevent the families going into emergency accommodations
- Support them when they are in Emergency Accommodation and
- Exit them quickly from homelessness.

In March this year, we were delighted with the breakthrough announcement from Ireland's Government, to develop a dedicated cross-Departmental and agency-led Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan. This child centred action plan is needed because we must finally acknowledge the additional vulnerability of children. We must recognise their unique rights and plan to meet their individual needs. Current laws and policies ignore children's rights and treat them simply as a dependent of homeless adults - that is wrong.

We very much welcome that children and young people will be consulted as part of the development of the plan and that a pilot Children's Rights Impact Assessment will form part of its development.

However, amendments to our housing legislation undermine this positive

shift. My Office is deeply concerned about recent changes to our laws that will make it harder for families to access emergency accommodation by introducing eligibility criteria. Those who are deemed ineligible, may be offered 'night-to-night' accommodation at the discretion of their local authority. This is not child centred nor in their best interests.

Indeed, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing recently intervened and warned Ireland that this could have severe consequences for victims of trafficking, people who have experienced domestic and gender-based violence, migrant communities and other vulnerable groups, and raises concerns that the legislation could contribute to an increase in dangerous rough sleeping.

Ireland has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognising their individual rights, but in planning for housing provision and addressing child homelessness these rights are not being fully considered.

In order for the State to fully protect, respect and fulfil children's rights, the UNCRC must be fully and directly incorporated into Irish law, and driving that change is something my Office is also working on.

Bold, brave measures are needed now to address what is a crisis of epic proportions for children in Ireland.

Our recommendations to the Irish Government are:

Full and Direct Incorporation of the UNCRC

Embed a children's rights approach into all decision-making to ensure housing policy, laws and practice fully uphold children's rights.

Focus on Prevention

Stop homelessness before it happens by supporting families at risk of losing their housing security.

Cross-Government Coordination

Treat child homelessness - not just as a housing issue, but as a multi-agency crisis requiring joined-up work across health, education and local government.

Support in Emergency Accommodation

Provide wrap-around supports for children stuck in emergency hubs covering education, physical and mental health and nutrition.

Accelerated Exits

Create explicit, fast-track pathways and ring-fenced allocations to move families quickly out of temporary accommodation.

Voice of the Child

Actively consult with children and young people with lived experience of homelessness to shape future housing policies.

I know it is not a simple problem to solve but it must be done.

Despite these concerns, I do remain optimistic that with political will, the new action plan can be a turning point, but I am also aware of the old saying – “If you make a promise, you create hope, and if you keep your promise, you create trust.”

ENDNOTES

- 1 From Ombudsman for Children's [Annual Report](#), 2017
- 2 From [No Place like Home](#) a report by the Ombudsman for Children's Office outlining children's views and experiences of living in Family Hubs.
- 3 In Ireland, a 'Family Hub' is a temporary emergency accommodation centre designed for families who are experiencing homelessness. These were created to replace being placed in hotels and similar environments to offer a more stable and supportive environment while families wait for permanent housing.