

“Family Hubs”: Lives on Hold

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INTRODUCTION

Many policy changes in Ireland in recent years have been launched and branded in terms of “hubs”. The language and proximate adjectives are attractive to policymakers. Hubs are innovative, dynamic, and quick to change and adapt to new opportunities and potential. Yet, not all hubs are alike and some do not have accompanying positive implications or effects.

Ireland has seen a growing and distressing occurrence of family homelessness. Policy responses have exposed a tendency towards institution-based solutions for homeless families. These have been introduced without a clear evidence base that they are appropriate to support the needs of these families, who are often in homelessness for a long period. Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC) has worked with over 1,000 homeless families in the last two years alone. Our clients’ experiences show the State’s abject failure to properly respond to the needs of vulnerable homeless families and even to meet its own stated policy objectives.

This essay will outline how policy responses to homelessness have shifted further into the institutionalised space and, drawing on our recent experiences at MLRC, demonstrate how this has stifled the development and independence of many families who find themselves without a secure home. The current pandemic underlines the need for evidence-based and informed responses to homelessness that put a safe home at the centre of any policy response. I will close with the argument that, entering into the first winter of a global pandemic, a policy which puts families, who were previously living independently, into an institutionalised space is short-sighted and potentially unjust, and contrary to the most basic public health recommendations.

GROWTH IN FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

In October last year, following eight consecutive months of homeless figures surpassing 10,000, the number of people

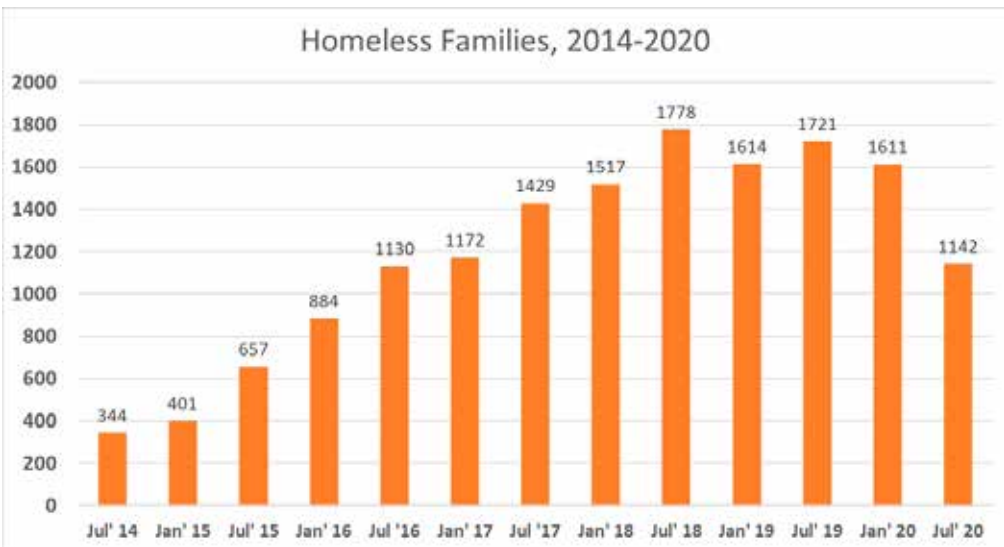


Figure 1: Homeless Families, 2014 to 2020

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homeless in Ireland peaked at 10,514.¹ This constituted the highest number since the Department started recording these figures. It should be noted that these figures do not include individuals who were removed from the homeless figures following a reclassification undertaken in 2018, despite those individuals accessing what is known as Section 10 funded accommodation.² Many of those taken out of the figures were individuals and families in supported temporary homeless accommodation, which is in part the subject matter of this article. The figures also exclude people sleeping rough, people couch surfing, homeless people in hospitals and prisons, those in direct provision centres or emergency reception centres/hotels, and homeless households in domestic violence refuges.³

Family homelessness has been increasing in Ireland since 2014. As of July 2020, of those recorded as officially homeless, there were 1,142 families (see figure 1 above) including 2,651 children.⁴

In July 2014, the number of homeless families across Ireland totalled 344; by July 2018, this had increased more than five-fold, with a total of 1,778 families recorded as homeless in the State.⁵

Children aged four and younger were the largest single age group experiencing homelessness, according to the last census.⁶ Children remain the single largest group within the homeless population and accounted for a third of those who were homeless last year.⁷

Figures alone cannot convey, or do justice to, the experience and the trauma of homelessness, particularly for children.⁸ The figures, even obfuscated, do however clearly evidence the failure of the State to implement robust policy responses to effectively reduce family homelessness. What we will see also in the experience of the many families supported by MLRC is the suffering that has been caused by somewhat ad hoc and ill-informed approaches in relation to homeless accommodation provision.

PROVISION OF EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION

There is no strict legal obligation on local authorities to provide emergency accommodation to a family that is presenting as homeless. There is a discretion, but no duty to provide such accommodation.⁹ A series of decisions of the High Court concerning local authorities and their statutory obligations towards homeless individuals, including

¹ Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, 'Homelessness Report October 2019' (Dublin: Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, November 2019), https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_october_2019.pdf

² A European Commission Report, authored by Prof. Mary Daly, issued a stinging rebuke of how the Irish Government calculates and presents its monthly data on homelessness. With 1,600 people vanishing from the homelessness count as those in "turn-key" homeless accommodation were no longer considered homeless, Daly concludes that the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government were engaged in "statistical obfuscation, if not corruption." See Mary Daly, 'National Strategies to Fight Homelessness and Housing Exclusion: Ireland' (Brussels: European Commission, 2019), <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8243&furtherPubs=yes>.

³ Most European member states use the ETHOS Light classification of homelessness which has six operational categories: people living rough; emergency accommodation; homeless accommodation; those in institutions due to lack of housing; those in non-conventional dwellings; and those with family and friends due to lack of housing. The Department of Housing, Planning, and Local Government has a narrow operational definition of homelessness. Of the six categories used by other member states, Ireland only calculates its homelessness figure based on two categories; those in emergency accommodation and homeless accommodation such as homeless hubs. As an example of the exclusionary nature of this definition, those in women's shelters or refuge accommodation are not counted.

⁴ Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, 'Homelessness Report July 2020' (Dublin: Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, August 2020), https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_july_2020.pdf.

⁵ Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, 'Homelessness Report July 2019' (Dublin: Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, August 2019), https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homelessness_report_-_july_2019.pdf.

⁶ Marie O'Halloran, 'Young Children Largest Homeless Age Group, Census Figures Show', *The Irish Times*, 11 August 2017, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/young-children-largest-homeless-age-group-census-figures-show-1.3182975>.

⁷ Children's Rights Alliance, 'Report Card 2020: Is Government Keeping Its Promises to Children?' (Dublin: Children's Rights Alliance, 2 March 2020), 36-45, <https://www.childrensrighs.ie/sites/default/files/CRA-Report%20Card%202020-Final.pdf>.

⁸ In a previous article for Working Notes, Dalma Fabian suggests that trauma and homeless are connected in at least three ways. Trauma is often experienced as part of the pathway into homelessness. However, Fabian argues that the loss of a home coincides with other losses such as loss of family connections and social interactions. Social exclusion can activate the same neurological response as physical trauma, with a similar effect on people's lives. See Fabian.

⁹ Mercy Law Resource Centre, 'Third Right to Housing Report: Children & Homelessness: A Gap in Legal Protection' (Dublin: Mercy Law Resource Centre, May 2019), <https://mercy.law.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Children-and-Homelessness--A-Gap-in-Legal-Protection.pdf>.



Children Sleeping at Tallaght Garda Station, Dublin. Photo by Inner City Helping Homeless

families, confirm that the local authorities enjoy broad discretion with respect of the homeless assessment. Past decisions indicate that the Courts will be extremely reluctant to interfere with the statutory discretion enjoyed by local authorities unless a decision is manifestly unreasonable or taken in bad faith.¹⁰

The wide margin of discretion afforded to the local authority within the current legal framework on provision of emergency accommodation does not properly protect homeless families. MLRC frequently intervenes in cases where families have been refused emergency accommodation and have resorted to sleeping in their cars, in parks, in uninhabitable caravans. As this article is being drafted, MLRC is supporting vulnerable families in the context of the pandemic, who have been refused homeless accommodation and who are having to sleep in such situations, in the absence of anywhere else to go. It is a truly shameful situation.

Families in need of homeless accommodation ordinarily present at, and are assessed by, the relevant local authority. If they are deemed to be homeless – that is, if they have established to the satisfaction of the local authority that

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they have no alternative accommodation available to them and cannot finance their own accommodation – they will be eligible for homeless accommodation which can be provided in a number of different forms.

Under Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988, the local authority has broad flexibility in relation to the manner in which homeless accommodation is provided. It is ordinarily provided indirectly, through non-governmental organisations, or commercial providers, for example a B&B or a hotel. Frequently, families will be obliged to source their own emergency accommodation, particularly at the start of their period of homelessness. This form is known as ‘self-accommodation’. For any homeless family, being put on ‘self-accommodation’ shifts the burden of sourcing homeless accommodation on to the family itself. The family must then call around to local B&Bs and hotels to source a booking, which at busy holiday times or for larger families or non-Irish national families can be impossible.

¹⁰ Three relevant High Court cases are explored by the Mercy Law Resource Centre in the Third Right to Housing Report: Children & Homelessness. Each case involved homeless families with minor children and in two of the cases, there was undisputed evidence before the Court that one family had been sleeping in a tent and another family had repeatedly presented to Garda stations in the absence of any alternative. See Mercy Law Resource Centre, 9–12.

MLRC has been engaged in a small number of cases where families are provided with emergency homeless accommodation just for one night at a time. This means that they must check out of their B&B or hotel each morning and cannot access the accommodation until the evening. Following advocacy by MLRC and other groups, a recommendation was made to cease provision of such chronically unstable and highly unsuitable accommodation, and it appears that this “one night only” form of emergency accommodation has been phased out.¹¹

RECENT POLICY RESPONSES

In recognition of the unsuitability of self-accommodation of homeless families in hotels and B&Bs, the last Government sought alternative approaches to homeless provision for families. In so doing, we saw a shift towards a provision of emergency accommodation through a more institutionalised form, by way of “family hubs”.¹²

The Government’s policy statement on family homelessness was included in *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness*. Published in June 2016, and due to remain in effect until 2021, the plan articulated the policy priority of reconfiguring emergency homeless accommodation to provide “supported temporary accommodation arrangements such as family hubs” in place of homeless accommodation provision in hotels and B&Bs.¹³ The stated aim of family hubs was to provide a form of emergency accommodation that offered greater stability for homeless families, facilitated more coordinated needs assessment and support planning including on-site access to required services such as welfare, health, and housing services, and provided appropriate family

supports and surroundings.¹⁴ Family hub accommodation was proposed to be a “short-term” measure with wraparound supports to assist families in accessing long-term housing, often in the private rented market assisted by the Housing Assistance Payment, and it was envisaged that placement in such hubs would be for a six month period. This may have been the intended dynamism of family hubs as families only remained in hubs for a short period before re-entering the precariousness of the private rental market.

Through 2018 and 2019, family hubs were rolled out as an alternative to commercial hotels and B&Bs for homeless families. At the beginning of 2020, there were 32 family hubs in operation, providing almost 720 units of accommodation for homeless families.¹⁵ Twenty-five of these are located in Dublin, two in Kildare and one each in Clare, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Louth. Substantial funding has been allocated to the family hub programme.¹⁶

The prioritisation of hubs, receiving much more Departmental focus and attention, has been at the expense of a Rapid Build Programme. This programme had greater prominence in the early years of *Rebuilding Ireland* and was designed to deliver housing for homeless families by way of modular homes placed on council lands. These would have been self-contained units where families would reside temporarily while they secured a long-term housing solution. The Rapid Build Programme has so far delivered just 423 homes out of a planned 1,500¹⁷ and was recently described as a “dismal failure”.¹⁸

¹¹ Dublin Region Homeless Executive, ‘Report to Housing Strategic Policy Committee’ (Dublin: Dublin Region Homeless Executive, March 2020), <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/content/files/Homelessness-SPC-Report-March-2020.pdf>.

¹² Family hubs are also sometimes referred to as “family accommodation hubs” in official communication or as “homeless hubs” by media outlets or civil society. ‘Accommodation for Families - Dublin Region Homeless Executive’, accessed 7 September 2020, <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/solutions/family-accommodation>; Evelyn Ring, ‘Fears Homeless Hubs May Have to Be Built for Elderly’, *Irish Examiner*, 23 December 2019, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-30971906.html>.

¹³ Department of Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government, ‘Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness’ (Dublin: Department of Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government, July 2016), 13, https://rebuildingireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Rebuilding-Ireland_Action-Plan.pdf.

¹⁴ Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, ‘Homeless Quarterly Progress Report - Quarter 2 2020’ (Dublin: Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, 2020), 13, https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_quarterly_progress_report_q2_2020.pdf.

¹⁵ Children’s Rights Alliance, ‘Report Card 2020: Is Government Keeping Its Promises to Children?’, 36–45.

¹⁶ Children’s Rights Alliance, ‘Report Card 2019: Is Government Keeping Its Promises to Children?’ (Dublin: Children’s Rights Alliance, 25 February 2019), 34, https://www.childrensrighs.ie/sites/default/files/submissions_reports/files/CRA-Report-Card-2019.pdf.

¹⁷ Children’s Rights Alliance, ‘Report Card 2020: Is Government Keeping Its Promises to Children?’, 36–45.

¹⁸ Michael Brennan, ‘Rapid-Build House Scheme for Homeless “a Dismal Failure”’, *Business Post*, 27 October 2019, <https://www.businesspost.ie/news-focus/rapid-build-house-scheme-for-homeless-a-dismal-failure-92928f3c>.

LIVES ON HOLD

For some families, placement in a family hub is initially a most welcome and much needed improvement on a room in a commercial hotel or B&B, or, at worst, rough sleeping. MLRC has worked with over 1,000 homeless families in the last two years. Many of these families have been placed in family hubs so we have heard first-hand their experiences in this form of accommodation. We recently documented many experiences of these families in a report titled “Lived Experiences of Homeless Families”.¹⁹

Unfortunately, for many of the families we have worked with, the relief that a family feels when moved into a hub is often short lived and gives way to a range of serious difficulties and concerns once the initial settling in period has lapsed. The concerns are centred on the limitations and controls placed on their day to day life within the hub and the major challenges of residing in a congregated setting.

It is important to acknowledge the very wide range in standard of family hubs. MLRC has observed several former commercial hotels and B&Bs being essentially re-branded as “family hubs”, with the same staff and core facilities in place. Such hubs fall short of providing the appropriate facilities and standards articulated in Government policy; in the experience of MLRC, these placements do not provide an appropriate setting for homeless families to live, albeit temporarily, in safety and dignity. Both the Office of the Ombudsman for Children and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission have also expressed concerns about the wide variation in standards of family hubs.²⁰

Family hubs that are operated in former commercial hotels in many instances lack the facilities, policies and appropriately qualified staff to properly support and meet the needs of vulnerable homeless families. Several families with whom MLRC has worked with

have described the “hubs” as little better than the commercial hotel or B&B they have moved from. Particular concerns include: restrictions on family life and on the lives of children in particular; invasions into family life and privacy; absence of facilities and space; limitations on cooking and laundry facilities; and poor attitude and expertise of staff. Such concerns are exacerbated when families spent excessive periods in such hubs, well outside the six months envisaged in *Rebuilding Ireland*.

One family MLRC worked with spent over two years in a family hub, which itself was a former commercial hotel. The family’s experience illustrated how completely unsuitable this congregated living situation was, with negative impacts on all members of the family, including young children. There were serious encroachments on the family’s privacy and dignity and their functioning as a family was seriously weakened. Such negative impacts were detailed in an extensive social worker report.

Particular aspects of their concerns bring the experience of congregated living into sharp focus. The family said that camera surveillance throughout the hub left them feeling constantly monitored. They felt further monitored by the requirement to sign in and out every time they came and went from the premises. The family had no one room big enough to allow them to eat together alone as a family and had limited access to cooking space and facilities. Strict rules that applied to hub residents resulted in the children being limited in their ability to interact or socialise with others. The children could not, for example, go into the rooms of other residents to play; they could not have friends over. Rules which existed to ensure the untroubled operation of a family hub placed active barriers to children developing creativity through play and having the nurturing role of peer friendships in their lives.

The imposition of house rules in family hubs, as experienced by that family, is a concern frequently articulated by the homeless families MLRC has assisted. These rules regulate the movement of families and place restrictions on their activities and use of the accommodation. MLRC is aware of

¹⁹ Mercy Law Resource Centre, ‘Report on the Lived Experiences of Homeless Families’ (Dublin: Mercy Law Resource Centre, December 2019), <https://mercylaw.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/MLRC-Child-and-Family-Homelessness-Report-5.pdf>.

²⁰ Ombudsman for Children’s Office, ‘No Place Like Home: Children’s Views and Experiences of Living in Family Hubs’ (Dublin: Ombudsman for Children’s Office, April 2019), 7, <https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2019/04/No-Place-Like-Home.pdf>.



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some cases where alleged infringements of such house rules have been used as a basis for “evicting” families from their placement, exposing them to a precarious housing situation and a further period of instability.

These physical limitations and restrictions have had a marked emotional impact on families living in hub settings. A common theme for the families MLRC has engaged with who have lived in family hubs is the feeling of stigma and inertia. Several of the children expressed embarrassment at their homelessness and chose to hide it from their peers. Their social skills deteriorated. According to school and social worker reports, they were unable to maintain normal relationships with their school friends.

These experiences of children residing in family hubs were also expressed in a report by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children released last year.²¹ The report was based on the experiences of 80 children living in family hubs across the country and found the children in these settings expressed feelings of sadness, confusion and anger in relation to their housing situation.

²¹ Ombudsman for Children’s Office, ‘No Place Like Home: Children’s Views and Experiences of Living in Family Hubs’.

Alongside the corrosive impact on children, parents expressed feelings of guilt at somehow being responsible for the family’s stay in the hub. Parents frequently articulated their concerns to MLRC over the challenges they encountered in looking after their children when surrounded by other families. They struggled to assert their own parenting methods and to maintain family spirit and cohesion in the congregated setting. The sense of normality slipped away.

MLRC’s experience of working with homeless families residing in family hubs clearly shows the debilitating and negative impacts on family functioning, brought about by living in a congregated setting in an institutional environment. The longer families remain in these settings, the greater the negative impact that can be observed. We know from recent reports, that 62% of those experiencing homelessness have been

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accessing emergency accommodation for more than six months.²² Several families that MLRC has worked with have lived in family hub placements far in excess of the six months envisaged by *Rebuilding Ireland*.

Of particular concern is the complete absence of research and consultation that preceded the rapid expansion of family hubs as a policy response to the increase in family homelessness. There was also a lack of rationale for their introduction expressed in the originating policy statement, *Rebuilding Ireland*. Academics researching the genesis of housing hubs concluded that “we find no international research or evidence base to justify the emerging family hubs model and note there have been no pilots to demonstrate how they might work. The danger with ‘hubs’ is that they both institutionalise and reduce the functioning capacity of families.”²³

Family hubs were presented as a “temporary” solution to what was believed to be a short-term problem of family homelessness. Yet, family homelessness has not reduced in any meaningful sense. Families are remaining in homelessness for years, not months. In this context, family hubs as a policy response is fast becoming a permanent feature of homeless policy. Despite calls by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and others, there has been little consideration as to whether or not this form of emergency accommodation truly provides for basic family needs.

WHERE TO NEXT?

It is unclear whether or not the new Government will pursue any alternative strategy specifically in relation to emergency accommodation provision for homeless families. The recent Programme for Government commits to tackling homelessness,²⁴ which is a noteworthy deviation from previous Governments who at least pledged to end homelessness. In relation

to family homelessness, the focus is on reducing the numbers of families entering homelessness and prioritising long-term sustainable accommodation for those who are already homeless. There is no consideration or mention of addressing issues in homeless accommodation provision to this group.

Covid-19 brought short-comings in homeless accommodation provision into sharp focus. The system of accommodating homeless individuals in overcrowded and insecure hostel accommodation was shown to be completely inadequate. The pandemic prompted responsive measures to protect vulnerable families and individuals residing in unsuitable homeless accommodation. Capacity was increased and new solutions were brought on stream in a relatively short period.

Several families MLRC were supporting were moved from overcrowded and highly unsuitable B&B accommodation into self-contained temporary accommodation. Those in family hubs generally stayed in their placements, with increased regulation around movement and procedures in order to manage the risks posed by Covid-19. One MLRC client told us that she was terrified of contracting the illness in the shared kitchen and that the sanitiser in the hub kept going missing.

The pandemic has the potential to refocus attention on the suitability of family hubs. They are congregated settings on a parallel with direct provision centres. They share similar characteristics: limited space, shared cooking and laundry facilities, communal living areas, and wide-ranging restrictions on movement and rules on all aspects of residence. They also share similar risks: the onset of the pandemic has created very serious health and welfare risks for the residents who cannot socially distance or separate themselves from other households. A home, or the concept of a home, is central to public health advice on safely managing Covid-19.²⁵

²² Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, ‘Homeless Quarterly Progress Report - Quarter 2 2020’.

²³ Rory Hearne and Mary P. Murphy, ‘Investing in the Right to a Home: Housing, HAPs and Hubs’ (Maynooth: Maynooth University, 12 July 2017), 32, <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Investing%20in%20the%20Right%20to%20a%20Home%20Full.1.pdf>.

²⁴ Government of Ireland, ‘Programme for Government - Our Shared Future’ (Dublin: Government of Ireland, June 2020), <https://static.rasset.ie/documents/news/2020/06/draft-programme-for-govt.pdf>.

²⁵ Health Service Executive, ‘Self-Isolation: Managing Coronavirus at Home’, 7 August 2020, <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/managing-coronavirus-at-home/self-isolation.html>.

Covid-19 has shown very clearly that hostels, hubs and hotels are not homes.

In June 2019, MLRC was before the Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government to make a submission in relation to family and child homelessness. That Committee published a report and made a number of significant recommendations in November 2019.²⁶ Amongst those was a recommendation that there be an independent, formal evaluation of the suitability of all family emergency accommodation including hubs and that this be done “as soon as is practicable”. We are not aware of any such evaluation being initiated as yet. It is now most urgently needed.

CONCLUSION

MLRC has persistently highlighted the failure of the Government to provide safe, secure and dignified homeless accommodation to vulnerable families. The policy shift towards provision of homeless accommodation to families in family hub accommodation as articulated in *Rebuilding Ireland* came about without a proper evidence base in relation to the suitability and long-term impacts of family hubs.

Such an approach seriously risks normalising homelessness by creating institutions where families are contained and supported. It ultimately risks putting them out of sight and out of mind.

Covid-19 has shown very clearly that hostels, hubs and hotels are not homes. They offer no security or privacy to homeless families. They are not an environment in which to live safely, in dignity and freely. Only a home can do that. Since our collective well-being now relies on each person being able to be safe in their own home and their own private space, we now more than ever need to put home at the centre of our thinking.

²⁶ Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, 'Report on the Impact of Homelessness on Children' (Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas, November 2019), 15, https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_children_and_youth_affairs/reports/2019/2019-11-14_report-on-the-impact-of-homelessness-on-children_en.pdf; Joint Committee on Housing, Planning & Local Government, 'Family and Child Homelessness' (Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas, November 2019), 6, https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_housing_planning_and_local_government/reports/2019/2019-11-14_report-on-family-and-child-homelessness_en.pdf.