

REPORT



From Immediate Need to Sustainable Solutions: Preventing Homelessness in Galway City

A solutions-focused event bringing together the Community & Voluntary sectors with key statutory agencies and the Local Authority to explore innovative solutions to the prevention of homelessness in Galway City, now and into the future.



From Immediate Need to Sustainable Solutions:

Preventing Homelessness in Galway City

From Immediate Need to Sustainable Solutions: Preventing Homelessness in Galway City was a collaboratively organised event that took place in Galway City in February 2018. The event was chaired by Professor Siobhán Mullally, Professor of Human Rights Law and Director of the Irish Centre for Human Rights at NUI Galway and Anastasia Crickley, the outgoing chairperson of The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the former head of the Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University. The event was addressed by:

- **Seán Kyne TD**, Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment with responsibility for Natural Resources, Community Affairs, and Digital Development.
- **Dr Kathy Reilly**, lecturer in Geography at NUI Galway, specialising in social and cultural geography.
- **Ned Brennan**, Chief Operations Officer Respond! Housing Association with responsibility for tenant services and special projects, including several Family Hubs for families experiencing homelessness.
- **John Moore**, Head of Operations at Ó Cualann Cohousing Alliance CLG. (deputising for Hugh Brennan, CEO)

Professor Mullally set the context for the conference by stating that the right to housing and accommodation is a human right and should be treated as such. She firstly introduced a brief video highlighting the extent of the homelessness issue in Galway and further highlighting a number of solutions.

Joint presentation

The Chairperson introduced Ann Irwin, Galway City Community Network; Martin O'Connor, COPE Galway; Karen Golden, Galway Simon Community; Diarmaid O'Sullivan, Threshold Galway; Margaret Ó Riada, Galway Traveller Movement and Fiona Jennings, Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, who presented a joint presentation on the current situation in Galway. It highlighted the following points:

- The organisation of the conference was a collaboration and the organisers hope that it will be a first step to more collaborative action
- The focus of the event was to acknowledge the scale of the issue re Housing and Homelessness and to move to solutions
- Rough sleeping was a feature throughout much of 2017
- Numbers in emergency accommodation are persistently high – currently there are 71 singles, 5 couples and 55 families in total, with 9 new families since mid-February in need of emergency accommodation
- Homelessness and the Traveller community is a crisis within a crisis and needs to end
- The lack of culturally appropriate accommodation provision for members of the Traveller community.
- The impact that homelessness has on the wellbeing of all, particularly children
- Problems in the private rented sector are at the root of much of the homelessness in the city

Positives over the past year

- More Social Housing lettings to people experiencing homelessness in 2017
- Increased Transitional Accommodation for singles
- Significant expansion of Multi-Disciplinary Team
- Development of the Tenancy Protection Service
- Tenancy Sustainment Service Piloting in County Galway to be extended to Galway City
- The introduction of a Housing First pilot project

- The opening of a dedicated Youth Service, providing accommodation for 8 and an outreach service to another 25 young people
- The launch of the #TravellerHomesNow campaign in November 2017

Challenges

- Numbers increasing
- Homeless accommodation and support services operating at capacity
- Complex Needs
- Inadequate Housing Supply – expected to continue throughout 2018 and beyond
- Significant and growing reliance on Private Emergency Accommodation
- Significant gaps in the implementation of the Traveller Accommodation Programme

Solutions

- Short-term
 - Early intervention when tenancies at risk
 - Increase awareness amongst the public of rights under the law and the availability of support services
 - Increased referrals to Tenancy Protection Service
 - Support Tenancy Sustainment Services
 - Enhanced inter-agency working and development of referral pathways
 - All year-round response to rough sleeping
 - Rough sleepers team - humanitarian response and approach to move out of rough sleeping
 - Addressing blockages in emergency and transitional accommodation
 - Care and Case Management approach to be introduced – needs to be resourced
 - Scheme of lettings to prioritise those who are homeless
 - Homeless Housing Assistance Payment
 - A local taskforce on Traveller accommodation specific to Galway City and County needs to be established to bring a multi-agency approach to seeking solutions to and dealing with the enormity of the Traveller accommodation crisis
- Long-term
 - Care and Case Management approach to be embedded
 - Housing and accommodation needs to be recognised as a fundamental human right with due regard to International Human Rights standards
 - Social Work Team needed with a holistic approach with a focus on health
 - HAT (Homeless Action Team) needs to be established
 - Development of inter-agency working
 - Mechanism for addressing gaps and blocks in service provision
 - Need to increase the supply of social housing;
 - Housing First approach needs to be introduced
 - Access to housing: Need strategy for ensuring access to housing from all possible sources (Local Authority; Approved Housing Bodies; Private Rental Sector – including Affordable Rental and Build-to-Rent)
 - The private rented sector will remain an important feature and needs to form part of the solution
 - Traveller accommodation must be delivered by a specialist agency, independent of the local authority and removed from the bias of local politics

Minister Seán Kyne

Minister Seán Kyne stated that the issue of housing and homelessness is the most pressing social and economic issue presently facing our country. He noted that the current under-supply of new homes is affecting lives right across our society while homelessness, particularly family homelessness, has been one of the most significant issues of public discourse over the past few years. He highlighted the

significant amount of work underway across Government and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government who are working tirelessly with housing authorities, the non-governmental sector and other stakeholders.

He stated that, while excellent work has been done in the delivery of homeless services, the solution to homelessness is not the provision of an increased volume of emergency accommodation, and that the long-term solution to the current homeless issue is to increase the supply of homes and to implement initiatives that prevent homelessness occurring in the first instance. He said that returning to a fully functioning housing and construction sector is critically important. The accelerated delivery of social housing is also critical in this regard, and accordingly, Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness is designed to accelerate all types of housing supply– social, private and rental.

He emphasised the Whole-of-Government Approach being pursued to address homelessness which he acknowledged is a complex issue and there is no single answer to it.

He stated that Minister Murphy held a Housing Summit in September last year and one of the key outcomes arising from that Summit was the establishment of a new Homelessness Inter-Agency Group, with senior representation from the key State organisations with a role to play in relation to homelessness and with the primary objective to improve the coordinated response of the State in relation to homelessness as well as accelerated delivery, with regard to homeless prevention measures and the range of services required by homeless households, whether they be healthcare, welfare, family or housing supports.

He noted that Housing Authorities oversee and fund a range of homelessness prevention and tenancy sustainment initiatives. Of note is the Threshold operated Tenancy Protection Service, an enhanced version of the service is operating in Galway which allows Threshold to refer Rent Supplement cases directly to the Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection so that ‘uplifted’ Rent Supplement payments can be approved to help ensure that families and individuals do not end up in homeless services.

The Minister also highlighted the Homeless HAP ‘Place-Finders’ Service, which he described as operating well in Dublin and Cork. It is not currently operating in Galway, but the Minister stated that Housing authorities were recently notified of the availability of Exchequer funding to support the implementation of this nationwide to exit homeless individuals and households from emergency accommodation.

The Minister noted the Galway Homeless Action Plan and stated that he hoped that it would be renewed. He further noted the lack of city-owned land in Galway City. He stated that the Department has made funding available but noted the difficulties that the high cost of land posed.

Dr Kathy Reilly, Department of Geography, NUI Galway

Dr Kathy Reilly told the conference the project she is working on with Dr Margaret Brehony aims to make a significant contribution to Irish policy interventions on homelessness (and its associated legislation and action plans) in addition to challenging societal perceptions of the homeless experience. She stated that the tentative findings of the project indicate the importance of local networks. She also stated that there is frustration with the state definition of homelessness and with the **lack of capacity** both in terms of beds and support services.

Kathy stated that there needs to be additional clarity on the reporting of homeless figures and there needs to be increased recognition within the media of the important impact of how homeless issues and experiences are communicated.

Ned Brennan, Chief Operations Officer, Respond!

Ned Brennan spoke on the issue of Family Hubs. He stated that while they are not a long-term solution to the homelessness crisis, they are an important feature. Family Hubs provide a caring model that includes a range of wrap-around services to help homeless families be in a better position to move to secure housing in the short term. Services are tailored to needs of individual

parents and children. Every family will have a keyworker and a support plan will be developed with every resident based on need. This, Ned highlighted, is transitional accommodation designed to be as close to a home as possible and to ensure that every person and child leaves the facility in a better position than when they arrived.

Anastasia Crickley, outgoing Chairperson of the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Introducing the second part of the conference, Anastasia Crickley re-emphasised the importance of embedding human rights in initiatives to address the homelessness crisis. She challenged duty bearers to be increasingly aware of their responsibilities towards rights holders. She congratulated all involved on the collaborative nature of the event.

John Moore, Ó Cualann Cohousing Alliance

John Moore (Head of Operations), deputising for CEO Hugh Brennan, from Ó Cualann Cohousing Alliance outlined the model they have pursued to provide affordable housing in Poppintree, Co Dublin. The vision of Ó Cualann is to make available quality housing in sustainable communities at affordable prices to people whose needs are not adequately served by the market and who do not qualify for social housing. John spoke of the willingness of Ó Cualann to work with local authorities around the country and, in co-operation with the local authorities, to develop communities similar to the one in Poppintree in other areas. He outlined in summary the financial models used by Ó Cualann and offered to share these models in greater detail with any interested parties.

Key Messages from the Roundtable Discussions

- Housing needs to be regarded as a right not as a commodity;
- The reasons behind the homelessness crisis are multi-faceted and solutions need a multi-pronged approach;
- The role of the local authority was emphasised, and Galway City Council should declare a homelessness crisis;
- The need for collaboration and co-operation in addressing the issue;
- There was broad agreement for the solutions proposed by the agencies in the initial presentation;
- A Homeless Action Team needs to be established in Galway without delay;
- The Regional Homeless Forum needs to meet regularly, and the Homeless Forum needs to be re-engaged as a priority;
- There needs to be a Vacant Properties Officer appointed – Galway City Council clarified that a submission had been made to the department and an officer is to be appointed.
- Galway City Council also clarified that while there are plans for building, this takes time and it will be 2019 before an output is seen;
- The Residential Tenancies Act needs to be amended to give people additional security of tenure;
- There needs to be improvement in the availability of properties and the turnaround of vacant local authority properties needs to be much quicker than it is currently;
- There was a question about the Tenant Purchase Scheme – is it rational to be selling local authority properties in the middle of a housing crisis?
- Homelessness can have a devastating impact on the welfare and wellbeing of children. It can impact on their ability to learn; to develop and to enjoy a safe space to play. However, there can be equally immediate concerns regarding their safety.
- Children and families finding themselves in a housing crisis need our help and support now at local level; they simply cannot wait around for further laws and policies to be created by government in order for their rights and needs to be met.

- Private emergency accommodation is unregulated and can be wholly unsuitable for children and families.

Recommendations from the Conference

- Early Intervention; this needs to take account of those presenting with complex needs. Need for a MDT and a Social Work Team (based on a care and case management approach). This needs to be based on a holistic approach which considers health, economic, housing and social needs and cultural needs
- Prevention: need to increase protection of tenants in PR sector through increased awareness of tenancy rights and security of tenure. Suggestion re a local publicity campaign? Housing Assistance Payment needs to be supported. Inspection of properties of all rental properties to ensure they meet Minimum Standards Regulations.
- Local Authority Housing Stock; appointment of a Vacant Properties Officer by LA to bring vacant housing back into use and so reduce the waiting list for Social Housing
- Planning; The Regional Homeless Forum and Galway City Homeless Forum need to be re-established and to meet regularly
- Crisis of Homelessness in the Travelling Community: There needs to be Accountability and transparency for the lack of progress in the delivery of the Traveller Accommodation Plans
- Housing Action Team; requirement to be established immediately and be multi-disciplinary in make-up and holistic in approach
- Housing First needs to be introduced as a model
- Explore whether the Ó Cualain model could be employed in Galway to deliver affordable housing.
- Galway City Council should acquire additional land on which to build social housing, given that it has plans for all the land it currently owns.
- Set up a local task force on Traveller accommodation specific to Galway City and County with a view to bringing a multi-agency approach to dealing with the enormity of the Traveller accommodation crisis
- Training to be provided for public bodies and locally elected representatives re their Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty. This is in line with their statutory duty (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014) in relation to their responsibility to actively promote equality, protect human rights and combat discrimination having regard to all their functions and powers. Training to be delivered with a focus on the provision of social housing.
- Engage with and monitor public bodies to ensure that they are implementing their Public Sector duty in relation to equality and human rights issues.
- Ireland must meet its obligations under Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to ensure that it protects a child's right to an adequate standard of living.
- Should a child require placing in emergency accommodation this should be limited to exceptional circumstances and only for short periods, i.e. no more than six weeks.
- We need our local authorities and our national government to recognise that it is never acceptable for a child to feel unsafe, to wonder whether they will have a roof over their heads.
- Enhanced recording of homelessness data is imperative; age of children (not dependents) to allow for planning and a needs-led response.

Contributors

Seán Kyne TD is the Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment with responsibility for Natural

Resources, Community Affairs, and Digital Development, Galway West - South Mayo. Minister Kyne served as a member of Galway County Council and since 2011 represents the constituency of Galway West and Mayo South in Dáil Éireann. As a TD he has served on the Oireachtas Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, as Vice Chair of the Oireachtas Committee on European Union Affairs, and as Chairman of the Fine Gael Committee on Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

Siobhán Mullally is Established Professor of Human Rights Law and Director of the Irish Centre for Human Rights at NUI Galway. She has published widely in the fields of gender, women's rights, migration, asylum and multiculturalism. She is currently the President of the Council of Europe anti-trafficking body, the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking (GRETA). She is a Commissioner with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and is a member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, The Hague.

Anastasia Crickley is the outgoing chairperson of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the former head of the Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University. She is a founder member and current chairperson of Pavee Point and Community Work Ireland.

Dr Kathy Reilly is a lecturer in Geography at NUI Galway, specialising in social and cultural geography. Kathy is currently working on the project 'Deconstructing Homelessness: Finding a place for Geography?' that explores multiple stakeholder perspectives across four case-study sites (Galway, Cork, Limerick and Dublin). With fieldwork currently drawing to completion the presentation will offer some preliminary insight from the collected data.

Ned Brennan has 26 years' experience working in the housing sector in both the local authority and the voluntary sectors. Over this period, he has developed an expertise in housing policy development, design, integration, management, maintenance, estate management and tenant engagement. He is currently Chief Operations Officer with responsibility for tenant services and special projects, including several Family Hubs for homeless families.

John Moore is Head of Operations at Ó Cualann Cohousing Alliance CLG (deputising for Hugh Brennan, CEO). John's vision is for fully integrated, cooperative, affordable housing in sustainable communities. He believes that we must change the way we address housing needs in Ireland, that land must be a resource for use in the common good and not a mere commodity to fetch the highest price. John believes that the Ó Cualann model can and should be replicated and scaled all over Ireland.