

**Submission to the Joint Oireachtas
Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on the impact of
homelessness on children**

May 2019

Introduction

- 1.1. Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on the impact of homelessness on children. Our policy analysis and comments in this submission are informed by our work with children and families across Ireland.
- 1.2. Barnardos mission is to help transform children's lives through our services; support parents; and challenge society where it fails our children. In 2018 we worked with nearly 18,000 children, young people and their families. Barnardos provides practical and emotional supports to children and parents in its 41 centres, in families' own homes, through the school environment, and within their communities.
- 1.3. Barnardos Family Support Services work with vulnerable children and families and are based at the heart of local communities. Our family support encompasses a very wide range of services including parenting programmes, breakfast clubs, after school groups, individual and group work with children including programmes for children affected by drugs and alcohol abuse, support programmes for children affected by family violence and services for children whose families are experiencing homelessness.

Impact of Homelessness seen by Barnardos

- 1.4. The shameful impact of the housing crisis was recently highlighted by the Ombudsman for Children in his report – *No Place Like Home*¹ – which captured the views and experience of children living in Family Hubs. Children consulted by the Ombudsman described how they feel shame, embarrassment, sadness and anger

¹ Ombudsman for Children's Office (2019) *No Place Like Home* - <https://www.oco.ie/news/i-know-its-a-house-but-its-not-a-home-family-hubs-through-the-eyes-of-children-who-live-there/>

for the circumstances they are living in. Children also felt a sense of unfairness as they struggle to understand why they do not have a home.

- 1.5. The experiences expressed in the OCO report are all too familiar to Barnardos project staff as the housing crisis is affecting many of the families we work with throughout the country. A recent examination of data gathered from Barnardos' case work with families and children indicates 25 per cent of individuals whose needs we assessed had one or more housing need. Examples of the types of housing need recorded include living in overcrowded conditions or temporary accommodation, facing the threat of homelessness and not having a suitable home.
- 1.6. For children living in any of these circumstances, this can mean a lack of privacy, a lack of space to play or do homework, sharing a bed with a parent or sibling, sleeping on a couch or in overcrowded bedrooms, and in many cases enduring long journeys back to their original school.
- 1.7. Barnardos provides vital supports to families experiencing homelessness and we help parents to navigate other systems of support. We are acutely aware, however, that not all families have access to our services nor can we provide as much support as is required in the current family homelessness crisis. The early years of a child's development are the most important and in too many cases this is being damaged by children experiencing the trauma of homelessness.

Quotes from Parents

'I feel life here [in Barnardos]. Every second Friday I really want to come here'.

'Barnardos are the one that helps me'.

'When I found out I was going to be homeless, I went to [Barnardos Project Leader] crying and she talked to me and told me everything would be alright. They have been great and given me letters of support'.

Impacts on Children

- 1.8. Homelessness exposes young children to environmental factors that can endanger their health. Homeless children begin to demonstrate significant developmental delays after 18 months which are believed to influence later behavioural and emotional problems. Homeless preschool age children also are more likely to experience major developmental delays and to suffer from emotional problems. By the time homeless children reach school age, their homelessness affects their social, physical, and academic lives. Barnardos works to promote children's learning

and emotional development. Needs are identified through a process of assessment, from which work with children is planned in order to ensure it is outcome-focused. Individual work allows children to express their needs, feeling and aspirations. This provides children with a positive experience of a caring adult relationship. Through this support, children are able to gain an understanding of their unique life story. It also helps build on, and strengthen, their resilience.

- 1.9. Many children we work with experience issues related to anger and self-esteem. Being accommodated in homeless accommodation exacerbates these feelings and stifles progress.
- 1.10. Project workers have noted increased experience of anxiety for children who are being accommodated in hotels. The lack of certainty and moving around further exacerbates this.
- 1.11. We see in our early years centres how the lack of access to play space has an impact on children's, particularly younger children, growth and development. For older children, they can no longer have friends over to visit them while being accommodated in hotels. This can mean the only source of play is computer games which can exacerbate feelings of isolation.
- 1.12. Barnardos has worked with young people undertaking state exams who have no access to a study space. One mother told us:

‘My daughter is in her junior cert year – she is at the first educational exam she is going to take and my concern is will she actually be able to pass it. She has no room in the hotel room to study. At the moment, I am doing the best I can by letting her go to the library after school for an hour which lets her study and revise as well as doing her homework’.
- 1.13. Older children, particularly teenagers, tell us about grappling with the stigma of being homeless and what, and whether or not they tell their friends and peers about their living circumstances. They do not have the opportunity to bring their friends home.

Impacts on Parents

- 1.14. Barnardos works with parents to support them to meet their children's needs for basic care, safety, emotional, warmth, stimulation, guidance and boundaries and stability and to cope with the responsibilities of being a parent.

- 1.15. There are also many challenges in relation to the everyday practicalities of parenting. The issue of access to food preparation and storage is well-documented², however in our work with parents other practical issues are also evident.
- 1.16. Families have no access to a washing machine in their accommodation and must identify external laundry facilities through family or friends or private operators. One mother told Barnardos that she stands at a garage for nearly an hour with her children while doing laundry.
- 1.17. Parents talk to use about the practicalities of what to do with ‘possessions’ – whether to store them or leave them behind. Sometimes they have to leave toys and other items behind if they have had to leave private rented accommodation which is sad and stressful for them and their children. Often families have to incur the additional costs of paying for storage for larger items such as furniture. A lack of storage also means that as the seasons change, there is nowhere to store summer or winter clothing. This means for some families that they have to get rid of or donate clothes which they would have otherwise have kept thus incurring extra costs in the future.
- 1.18. Many families are accommodated two or three bus journeys away from their children’s school and therefore must leave their accommodation before 7am in order to make it to school on time. One parent described having to give her child his medication at the bus stop on the journey to school as it must be taken one hour after he eats. Another described having to walk around a shopping centre with her two younger children while waiting for the eldest child to finish secondary school before the family makes a long journey back to their hotel accommodation.

Challenges in delivering support to families experiencing homelessness

- 1.19. All parents need support at some time during their child’s life. This can be due to a need to improve parenting skills or because the family is dealing with a specific challenge, for example bereavement, parental relationship breakdown, developmental delays or disability. In these situations families benefit from a family support service. By ‘family support’ services we mean a service which evaluates what a child and family’s needs are and carefully tailors a personal package of

² Share, M. & Hennessy, M. (2017). Food Access and Nutritional Health among Families in Emergency Homeless Accommodation. Dublin: Focus Ireland. Available: <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Share-and-Hennessy-2017-Food-Access-Report-%E2%80%93-Main-Report-FINAL.pdf>

services to respond to those needs. These may include but are not limited to parenting programmes, therapeutic supports and practical advice and help. For families experiencing homelessness or hidden homelessness, family support services are a critical protective factor for children.

- 1.20. Delivering Family Support when a family is being accommodated in emergency accommodation is challenging. A pre-requisite of doing any parenting work is that basic needs have been met. For families living with homelessness, having basic needs met is a daily challenge. Often times project workers can only do practical work such as providing help with filling in forms, budgeting, and providing emotional support as the parent may not be in a position to focus on the work in relation to their parenting because of the circumstances in which they are living. 'Homework' set by project workers can be difficult to complete. For example, setting routines around mealtimes is difficult to implement when there are no available or shared cooking facilities.
- 1.21. The uncertainty of having to 'self-accommodate' results in families having to move from hotel to hotel. Logistics can become overwhelming and we see parents who are both physically and emotionally exhausted.
- 1.22. Work with children experiencing homelessness often takes place at the child's school as the school can provide a consistent and stable environment. Support from the school community (including teachers), can anchor this work with the child. This becomes challenging when the child is having to travel great distances from temporary accommodation or has to move (or miss) schooling due to the distances and travel time involved.

Impact of Hidden Homelessness

- 1.23. Each month the Department of Housing releases figures on the number of children and families living in hotels and emergency accommodation. Separate to this many of the children and families Barnardos works with are experiencing hidden homelessness. This refers to families who are temporarily accommodated (usually with friends or family) but their living situation is precarious and unsustainable³. Hidden homelessness is most frequently characterised by overcrowded accommodation⁴ which is unsuitable for children.

³ London Assembly Housing Committee. (2017) *Hidden homelessness in London*. London: London Assembly.

⁴ Overcrowding is defined in legislation as when two people over ten years old who are opposite sex but not in a relationship must share a bedroom due to lack of space or less than four hundred cubic feet of air space per person per bedroom - Housing Act, (1966). Available at <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1966/act/21/section/1/enacted/en/html#sec1> [accessed 11 May 2018]

1.24. Census 2016 showed a 28% rise in the number of households with more people than rooms as well as an increase in the number of persons per household, particularly in urban areas⁵. However, aside from these figures there is little or no concrete data on the actual numbers of people in over-crowded accommodation, 'sofa-surfing' and other precarious living situations and the experiences of these families remain hidden.

1.25. The reality for children is that sharing a room with multiple siblings, parents, aunts, uncles or grandparents can hinder their emotional, social, mental and physical development. The challenges faced by those accommodated in hotels are often mirrored by those living in overcrowded accommodation or other precarious situations. One parent Barnardos worked with had two children (boy (aged 9); girl (aged 7)) and was living at home with her parents as well as her sister, her sister's partner and her three children (boy (aged 7) and twins (aged 1 month)). The house has 3 bedrooms with mum and two children in one room. The parent said:

'I feel that myself and my children have been forgotten and do not matter. The state does not see me as homeless as we are in a family home. However, like people living in hotels we are also limited to space and some form of freedom for the children. We do not have our own space or own family time. We are restricted to what we have'.

1.26. Similar to those living in emergency accommodation, children and parents living in overcrowded accommodation have no access to privacy or their own personal space. Some children share a bed with a parent while younger children are reduced to using toddler beds, despite physically growing out of them, due to lack of space. For adolescents the lack of personal space can be particularly challenging and impact severely on their social and emotional wellbeing.

1.27. Barnardos also works with families who are living in poor standard accommodation in the private rented sector who fear the prospect of homelessness should they raise legitimate issues with their landlords. One project worker said:

'I was visiting a family when I noticed a rat crawling on the kitchen counter. The family have nowhere else to go and are too scared of a rent increase or eviction to complain to their landlord'.

⁵ Central Statistics Office. (2017) *Census of Population 2016*. Dublin: Central Statistics Office.

- 1.28. Child protection issues can arise in situations of overcrowded accommodation just as they can for those in emergency accommodation. This can be due to the inappropriate sharing of bedroom spaces, the lack of privacy for those forced to sleep in a communal area etc.

Impact of homelessness in rural areas

- 1.29. While homelessness and the housing crisis are largely thought of as an urban phenomena, families in rural areas also experience issues. There are similar issues with regard to having to stay in overcrowded accommodation, lack of private rented accommodation options, poor standards and discriminatory practice (e.g. potential landlords saying the property is not suitable for children or not wanting to take HAP). However, the lack of availability of property in rural areas poses particular problems.
- 1.30. One young family that Barnardos is working with recently found a house to rent through a friend of a relative. The property is in good condition but the location is extremely isolated. The house is down a country road and then down a further slip road. It is a fifteen minute walk to the local link transport service and it costs €24 to get to the nearest main town. Their extended family members are living in the next main town and it costs €48 round trip to get to. The family are currently dependent on social welfare so saving for a car and the associated costs is out of reach. This means the family may not leave the house for over a week. For this family lack of housing supply means the family has had to move away from their support networks and services increasing their isolation at a vulnerable time in their lives. Furthermore, the cost of transport severely reduces their ability to get back to education, training or access employment.

Policy responses needed

- 1.30 Responses to homelessness do not lie solely with those charged with delivering social housing output or implementing housing policy. To protect children and families who find themselves homeless a multi- departmental approach is required with roles for the Department Children and Youth Affairs, Department of Education and Skills, and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection coordinated by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.
- 1.31 The most important policy change needed is to build more social housing. The target in the Government's Rebuilding Ireland Strategy is to build 50,000 new social homes by 2021. We are over half way through the lifetime of the plan and yet to see any

meaningful change to the number of social houses coming on stream⁶. Most recent data from the Housing Agency states that in 2018 there were 71,858 people are in need of social housing support. While hidden homelessness is not a specific criteria for social housing allocations, for around 30 per cent of these requests overcrowded or unsuitable accommodation are listed as the main reason for seeking social housing supports⁷. There is a clear need for much greater output much more quickly than is currently happening.

Recommendation: Pursue a housing-led approach by increasing the output of built and acquired Local Authority and Approved Housing Bodies social housing units in 2020 to ensure that the target of 50,000 social housing homes are delivered by 2021 as committed to in Rebuilding Ireland.

Recommendation: In the interim period, the Department of Housing must provide appropriate accommodation and end the practice of 'self-accommodation' and one night only and long-term use of emergency accommodation for families with children.

- 1.31. Services are key to helping children and families experiencing homelessness cope and find a path towards a home of their own. There is a need to increase availability of targeted family support services for those suffering homelessness, hidden homelessness, and at risk of homelessness. The most effective and cost efficient way for the Government to maximise children's potential is to support their family. Supporting parents and families at this highly vulnerable time in their lives is a practical, cost effective, and evidenced method to reduce child protection and welfare referrals and improve outcomes for children.

Recommendation: Allocate funding of €20 million annually to provide an additional 540 family support workers to work with approximately 12,500 families per year⁸. These family support workers can be based in existing organisations to avoid the need for additional infrastructure.

Recommendation: Enhance existing services to ensure that households experiencing hidden homelessness can receive supports including: family support services, leap cards to facilitate attendance at school, medical and therapeutic

⁶ Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. (2016) *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*. Dublin: Government Publications.

⁷ The Housing Agency. (2018) *Social Housing Assessments*. Dublin: The Housing Agency.

⁸ Health Service Executive. (2018) *Consolidated Salary Scales 1st January 2018- Amended*. Dublin: Health Service Executive. Calculated based on average Family Support Worker salary of €36,975.

appointments, free quality afterschool services and access to breakfast and lunch clubs.

Recommendation: Review and support all state funded information and advice services to ensure that they are reaching those experiencing hidden homelessness and providing tailored information and advice on accessing supports and securing a home.

- 1.32. Barnardos recognise that addressing the housing crisis and its impact on children requires radical changes in housing legislation, policy and practice. The OCO report extensively examines what needs to happen to have real change in children's lives. Furthermore the report does not just scrutinise what needs to happen purely from an analysis of existing policy and legislation documents but rather captures and incorporates the views of children in the shaping of recommendations.

Recommendation: Fully implement the recommendations for change contained in the OCO's recent report particularly those that were put forward by children themselves as part of the Ombudsman consultation with them.

Conclusion

- 1.33. The impact of homelessness on children and their families is seen every day in Barnardos services across Ireland. Children who grow up in homelessness can experience long-term effects on their development and capacity to reach their full potential. And children can't afford to wait for long-term solutions that may tackle affordable housing. Young children don't have years. Their experiences are affecting their development every day, These shameful experiences can only be mitigated or eradicated completely through government action. Primarily the government must build social housing and they must do so quickly. In the absence of the actual delivery of social housing and in the interim, whereby thousands of children languish in Emergency Accommodation, supports must be put in place in order to help them to deal with this trauma. Concrete and visible action in these two areas is critical.
- 1.34. Alongside this Barnardos recommends providing supports to those experiencing hidden homelessness. These supports should address the fact that families experiencing this form of homelessness are often forgotten by support services as they do not 'appear' in official figures.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Pursue a housing-led approach by increasing the output of built and acquired Local Authority and Approved Housing Bodies social housing units in 2020 to ensure that the target of 50,000 social housing homes are delivered by 2021 as committed to in Rebuilding Ireland.
2. In the interim period, the Department of Housing must provide appropriate accommodation and end the practice of 'self-accommodation', one-night only accommodation and long-term use of emergency accommodation for families with children.
3. Allocate funding of €20 million annually to provide an additional 540 family support workers to work with approximately 12,500 families per year⁹.
4. Enhance existing services to ensure that households experiencing hidden homelessness can receive supports including: family support services, leap cards to facilitate attendance at school, medical and therapeutic appointments, free quality afterschool services and access to breakfast and lunch clubs.
5. Review and support all state funded information and advice services to ensure that they are reaching those experiencing hidden homelessness and providing tailored information and advice on accessing supports and securing a home.
6. Fully implement the recommendations for change contained in the OCO's recent report particularly those that were put forward by children themselves as part of the Ombudsman consultation with them.

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⁹ Health Service Executive. (2018) *Consolidated Salary Scales 1st January 2018- Amended*. Dublin: Health Service Executive. Calculated based on average Family Support Worker salary of €36,975.

Appendix 1: Case Studies

Case Study 1

Ann has two young children, Ben (4 years) and Ciara (3 years), who are all currently living in a B&B in North County Dublin. Ann is so committed to the work that she is doing with Barnardos that she undertakes a 2 hour journey to get to Barnardos each morning. This journey involves a 20 minute walk to the train station, a train journey to Connolly station and then a bus to Barnardos service in Mulhuddart. Can you imagine what it is like to travel for 2 hours at peak commuter time with 2 small children. The impact of the journey length on the children was brought to the fore recently when due to a lack of an available toilet on the train the little 3 year old wet herself and spent the rest of the journey to Mulhuddart distressed and uncomfortable.

In the B&B, Ann has to share a kitchen with other families. It can be hard to prepare family meals when the kitchen is only available at set times and there is always a queue of families waiting to use the facilities. With so many people using the cooking facilities it is often left unclean and there is always a mess to work around before Ann begins preparing a meal. Because it is so stressful in the morning, Ann often gives her children an oat bar and waits until she gets to Barnardos where she knows that she will not only get a warm welcome but also a nutritious breakfast for herself and her children. We are also able to provide Ann and the children with fruit and small pots of porridge, pot noodles to take home – all of which are easily prepared in the B&B. We have given Ben a back-pack with some small games and books so that he has something to play with in the small room the family lives in.

Ann is isolated from her family and friends. She has identified both Barnardos and the Tusla Social Worker as key supports in her life. While the journey to Barnardos takes up a lot of time each day, Ann is committed to coming as she sees the positive impact our early years programme is having on her children's well-being and development. She also values the parenting support she is receiving and the advocacy work we have done on her behalf in relation to her housing needs. Fortunately, Ann recently heard that she will move into a new home in Mulhuddart in March.

Case Study 2

Brenda has three children, Emma (9 years), Declan (4 years) and Fiona (18 mths), and she is currently living in a hotel near Dublin Airport. To get to Barnardos service in Finglas, Brenda takes a shuttle bus from the hotel to the airport, from there a bus to town and from town another bus to Finglas. She had been carrying all of the family's belongings in seven plastic bags which are attached to Fiona's buggy. She now has two rolling suitcases which we were able to buy for her.

We have also given Brenda a play mat for Fiona so that she can crawl around safely as very often the floors in hotel rooms are not clean enough.

Emma continues to go to the same school she has always gone to in Finglas which is a really important for her and her social-emotional and educational well-being. Declan, who is four, was due to start school last September. However, he is so anxious that he wasn't able to settle into school. We have agreed that he can remain in the Barnardos early years service and gradually transition into primary school. Declan arrives every morning to Barnardos with a sausage from breakfast time in his hand showing us that he worries about food and demonstrating his need for care and attention.

Brenda is still waiting for suitable accommodation for her and the children.