

RESPONSE OF NON-PROFIT HOUSING SECTOR TO COVID-19

Members of the Irish Council for Social Housing (ICSH) have had to adapt rapidly to the changing demands arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, according to Donal McManus, ICSH Chief Executive Officer, and he outlines the range of measures introduced by the housing associations to meet the challenges faced by the sector over the last few months.

Although there are up to 40,000 households accommodated by housing associations or approved housing bodies (AHBs) throughout the sector in 2020, a significant number of these households have included vulnerable households comprising older people, homeless households, people with disabilities, and families with children.

From mid-March, housing associations introduced measures to identify vulnerable households, engaged in direct contact with them and provided necessary supports where vulnerable tenants could not leave home.

These measures ranged from direct phone contact and online support with tenants, outreach support such as travel to shopping and other household related supports. Many of these initiatives were often undertaken in partnership with other public and private organisations.

STRONG SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

In some cases, housing associations, where they have a strong presence in local communities reached out to other vulnerable and isolated people in the wider local community.

One common feature has been the strong regular engagement that the ICSH and AHBs had with the Department of Housing and Housing Ministers, local authorities, the Housing Agency, regulators, financial bodies, DRHE, HSE and an Garda Síochána with the common goal of limiting the transmission of Covid-19.

Conversely, there had been some practical challenges in the sector such as securing the required level of PPE in



An afternoon of music at one of the 'balcony sessions' at McAuley Place in Naas, Co. Kildare.

a consistent manner, especially for staff working in supported housing projects. A number of housing associations also worked with other stakeholders in identifying and managing suitable properties, including hotels and other vacant properties for homeless households who required isolation.

This was also coupled with continuing priority allocation of housing association homes for homeless persons sought by the Government and, thereafter, general lettings whilst also prioritising essential repairs.

Social housing has demonstrated its value and resilience for low-income and vulnerable tenants during the pandemic with its affordable income-related rents (where rents can be adjusted in relation to changes in household income) and secure tenancies.

There may be challenges for some housing associations in the coming months, depending on different scenarios that emerge arising from tenants who were previously employed compared to tenants on fixed incomes.

It is also important for housing associations to ensure good housing management in having a duty of care to

all tenants in a project and that any cases of serious or anti-social behaviour can be dealt with promptly.

ESSENTIAL WORKERS AND SITES

The ICSH had identified the profile and scale of essential workers operating across the sector, and the inclusion on this list



Fold Ireland's reopened construction site in Dublin.



Social distancing and allocation of new homes by Tuath Housing in Co. Meath.



Managing supported housing in a safe, socially-distanced way at Westgate Foundation, Ballincollig, Co. Cork

assisted, to ensure a continuity of service delivery in supported housing projects and housing management with those on-site staff being able to return to work in a timely manner.

Additional costs have accrued for many housing associations, particularly with deep cleaning in various projects with communal facilities, AHB's sourcing their own PPE where it was in short supply, as well as additional staff and IT supports that were required in the new working environment.

While the closing of social housing construction sites, on public health grounds, would have some impact on the delivery of new homes, the subsequent reopening of 67 social housing construction sites, as prioritised by Housing Agency in May and which included AHBs sites, was welcome. The reopening of these priority sites resulted in a bid to regain some ground for lost construction time.

Lone Working; Challenging Behaviour; Return to Work Safely protocols; CALF; Homelessness; Supported and Sheltered Housing; Housing for People with Disabilities; Avoiding Burnout and Compassion Fatigue.



CAPACITY BUILDING

Housing associations and the ICSH moved quickly to various online platforms to continue to undertake work and provide services. In response to requests by members for updated information and engagement during the pandemic, the ICSH delivered a range of webinars, seminars and meetings on a regular basis.

These included Housing Management, Allocations and Insurance; Governance;



ICSH engages with members through Zoom webinars during lockdown.