

Speech of Darragh O'Brien TD, Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage – Dáil Statements on the Department response to COVID-19

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** *Check against Delivery*

Introduction

In the 11 months since our first recorded case of COVID-19 our public services have been tested as never before. In this worst of times for so many, the best of public service and community spirit has come to the fore. The concept embodied in the Irish word “meitheal”, daoine ag teacht le cheile chun obair a dheanamh agus a chuid fadhbanna a sharú, community cooperation in a time of social need, has been visibly lived across Ireland.

Overview

At the outset I must recognise the sustained efforts and commitment shown by the staff of my Department since the start of this emergency. From Day 1, rapid redeployment of staff and rollout of ICT equipment has kept our essential services operating and allowed for full remote working. The Department's COVID-19 Response Plan consolidates national best practice with specific reference to our several work locations. In addition to this, we have assimilated 487 new staff following the transfer of Heritage functions to my Department in September 2020, leading to a 50% increase in the size of my Department.

The vast majority of Departmental staff are working from home, but a minority are required to attend physically at work to deliver key supports in areas such as ICT and, in Met Éireann, the provision of weather forecasts and warnings, services to aviation and flood forecasting.

Our park rangers and staff in the National Parks and Wildlife Services (NPWS) are arguably busier than ever, with people exploring their own local area, restrictions permitting.

All of the State Bodies have taken large leaps in terms of providing their services in virtual, online ways and this will be one of the long-term positive legacies of this entire COVID-19 experience.

I want to also pay tribute to members of the Fire Service, who as emergency responders are on our frontline. In particular I want to mention the Dublin Fire Brigade paramedics who are at the very coalface of this pandemic.

Shutdown in Construction

As Deputies are aware the shut down in construction has been extended until March 5th. This 9 week shutdown will undoubtedly have a significant impact on our delivery. I am currently working with my Department to assess this impact and we will not be found wanting in exploring all options to make up any shortfall.

Homelessness

Protecting the most vulnerable has been the key priority for the Department, especially those living in homelessness. The rapid and joined-up response by our homeless services – and their extraordinary commitment - resulted in an unprecedented upscaling of services to keep our users safe.

To meet the challenges of social distancing, new facilities were rapidly opened. Shielding has been provided for those most at risk of getting seriously ill from COVID-19 and additional accommodation has been put in place to allow for self-isolation.

Outbreaks of COVID-19 have thankfully remained relatively low amongst the homeless population, a testament to the hard work of all involved and the co-operation between homeless services and the HSE. The response of service users to the supports provided, as measured by the HSE's National COVID-19 Homeless Service User Experience survey which reported in November, has been broadly positive.

The needs and challenges expressed by service users in the survey will be integrated into service planning. This will inform the provision of more integrated and person-centred services for everyone experiencing homelessness in Ireland. This will be a positive legacy from a very difficult period for our country.

My Department has provided approximately €12.5m per quarter in additional COVID-19 related funding to support these efforts. I have also provided for the further costs that have arisen from the provision of 24-hour services in facilities, which were introduced to minimise the need for service users to travel.

During this period we have made significant progress in tackling homelessness, although the situation is still challenging. The homeless figures for November show a decrease of 1,964 individuals or 18.8% on the total recorded in November 2019.

Thankfully there has been a 38.6% decrease in the numbers of families in emergency accommodation and a very welcome 72% reduction in the number of families accommodated in commercial hotels in the past year.

The Dublin Region Homeless Executive recorded its highest number of tenancies created in a month in November, with 381 created in total and they are helping to prevent people from ever entering homelessness services as well as helping those who are engaged in them to successfully exit.

The next quarterly report on homelessness will be published tomorrow, Friday 29 January, and I expect to see a further reduction in the numbers of homeless individuals and families.

In Budget 2021 we have put aside €218m for homeless spending, an increase of 31% on Budget 2020, and with numbers falling we are moving towards long term solutions not just keeping our head above the water.

Rough sleepers are at the very sharp end of homelessness and are among the most vulnerable individuals in society. Rough sleeping is a persistent issue and I have provided the resources to ensure that there is a bed available for everyone who needs one.

In addition I have instructed all housing authorities that local connection criteria should not be a barrier to accessing services. I am keeping this under review to ensure it is adhered to. Enhanced outreach teams operate 18 hours per day, interacting with people on the street, encouraging them to take up offers of a bed or to return to accommodation they may already have. I'd like to thank and highly commend all of the outreach teams who have been magnificent throughout this pandemic.

While COVID-19 has posed huge challenges, there have also been opportunities. My Department, local authorities, the Department of Health, the HSE and NGO service providers have worked together, and existing relationships have been strengthened.

The strong collaboration that has developed must continue and should yield longer-term benefits. For instance, it's essential that health supports are provided in tandem with housing support, particularly for the most vulnerable homeless individuals who are on the streets or at risk of rough sleeping. I speak regularly to Minister Donnelly and can say with confidence that this is something we agree on.

I meet regularly too with my own homelessness taskforce. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic is to the forefront of our thoughts and we regularly assess what is working, what isn't, what measures we must keep in place long after the pandemic has gone and so on. This too will continue long after the pandemic has gone.

Rental Measures and Supports

Tenants and landlords are experiencing economic difficulties as a result of the series of restrictions aimed at suppressing the spread of the virus. To mitigate the impacts on the rental sector a number of legislative changes have been implemented to better protect tenants.

At the outset of the first lockdown, emergency measures provided that tenants could not be forced to leave their rental accommodation, other than in exceptional circumstances, and also prohibited any increase to rent for the duration of the period. Those emergency laws ceased to have effect from 1 August.

Thereafter, I introduced the Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020 to protect tenants facing rent arrears and at risk of losing their tenancy. Subject to the eligible person making a declaration, the earliest termination date allowed is 13 April 2021. In addition, for relevant tenancies, rent increases are prohibited until 13 April 2021, with no back-dating allowed.

Members of the opposition voted against these protections, thankfully they had a change of heart and recently voted for the extension of them. A welcome relief to the tenants who have applied for and received these protections.

In October I introduced new legislation that automatically linked a 5km travel restriction on public health grounds to an eviction moratorium. Under this act a moratorium on evictions came into operation on 31 December and will remain in operation until 15 March or later if necessary, with limited exceptions such as extreme anti-social behaviour.

Again, there was some opposition to this targeted and balanced measure back in October, but it is clear that this legislation is working to protect those most affected by this pandemic.

July Stimulus Voids

Shortly after taking office, in July last year I announced a €40m allocation to bring 2,500 vacant social homes back into use as part of the July Stimulus programme. There are now an additional 2,565 social homes, refurbished and allocated to people on the social housing list and those who are experiencing homelessness.

Overall in 2020, 3,607 social homes were brought back into use. The voids programme was and is a very important tool in our armoury, when the current shutdown in construction activity is having an impact on delivery.

July Stimulus Waiver

As part of the July Stimulus I also allocated over €40 million to the Irish Water leakage reduction programme. This led to activity across all 26 counties addressing leakage, water scarcity and drought and the creation of up to 350 jobs. As Deputies will be aware water and wastewater infrastructure are vitally important to progressing projects across the country, delivering jobs, capacity for housing and development and supporting economic growth. The July Stimulus allocation and the Government's commitment in Budget 2021 of €1.3 billion for water services demonstrates that this is a priority area.

July Stimulus Help-to-Buy

The Government took a decision also as part of the July Stimulus to expand the Help to Buy Scheme for new and self-build properties. The maximum amount first-time buyers can claim will be increased to €30,000. This enhanced Help-to-Buy was extended in Budget 2021. Despite calls from members opposite to scrap this scheme it has already helped over 21,000 first-time buyers to purchase their own home.

Local Authority Mortgages

In recognition of the financial pressures some borrowers are facing I have put in place a 4th consecutive mortgage re-payment break for Local Authority loan recipients. This is a further step to alleviate the burden on struggling households.

Planning

As an essential underpinning of wider economic and other development it is vital that the planning system continues to operate under the current Level 5 restrictions, subject to appropriate safety protocols and delivering services online where feasible.

Planning is deemed an “essential service” and many aspects of the system are now entirely deliverable online, while still facilitating in-person interaction where it is needed and in strict compliance with safety protocols.

The Department has introduced planning-related provisions to assist with the national COVID-19 response, including regulations to waive planning requirements for the change of use and repurposing of existing buildings and facilities, for instance test centres or vaccination centres, or the provision of temporary new-build accommodation and structures to address the COVID-19 civil emergency, by or on behalf of a Government Minister.

I have also asked the Attorney General to review the necessity of extending planning permissions for an appropriate period of time due to the effective closure of the construction sector.

Building Control

Similar temporary exemptions or relaxations relating to the Building Control Regulations have also been introduced for HSE-led COVID-19-related projects. The primary focus is on the delivery of facilities to support the response to COVID-19 in the quickest and most efficient way possible while ensuring the health, safety and welfare of people in and around buildings.

The changes to Building Control Regulations reduce the administrative processes and requirements for COVID-related classes of buildings while maintaining appropriate and reasonable building standards. As with the Planning exemptions, these regulations continue until 9 June 2021.

Conclusion

These have been extraordinary days of challenge but we can draw solace in some of the old words passed down to us from generation to generation containing a deep and abiding truth: Anois agus muid i ndorchadas an gheimhridh, tagann dhá sheanfhocal chugam: “ar scáth a chéile a mhairimid” agus “Ní neart go cur le chéile”

The wisdom of these Irish proverbs reminds us that we all exist in each other’s shadow and that strength comes from unity. This should guide us in the months ahead, as slowly but surely, we turn the tide on this pandemic and look to brighter days ahead.