



Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
Consultation on Development of the Department's Strategy for
2017-2020

Introduction

Threshold is a national housing charity with regional advice centres in Dublin, Cork and Galway. We provide frontline services across Ireland to people with housing problems in the private rented sector. Our primary objective is to prevent homelessness by advocating for tenants through our advice services and through our dedicated national Tenancy Protection Service. Our vision is an Ireland where everyone has access to affordable, secure, suitable and good quality housing. We campaign for a fair, sustainable rental market with a clear emphasis on supporting, informing and advocating for vulnerable tenants.

Threshold advocates for a rights based approach to housing and regards adequate housing as a human right. Housing was recognized as part of the right to an adequate standard of living in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Everyone should have the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity. Access to adequate housing is a precondition for the enjoyment of other human and socio-economic rights, including the rights to health, privacy and education.

Adequate housing is a precondition for the exercise of the right to work, a right which must be touchstone for the newly formed Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. As the Supreme Court has noted the right to work goes to the essence of human personality and forms an inherent part of human dignity.¹ In order for this right to be fully vindicated individuals must have access to secure and affordable housing.

¹ *N.H.V -v- Minister for Justice & Equality and ors* [2017] IESC 35

We call upon the newly formed Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to join with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government to ensure that human dignity and the right to adequate housing is placed at the centre of Government policy.

Department of Social Protection Statement of Strategy 2016 – 2019

The current departmental strategy contains detailed commitments derived from the ‘Programme for Partnership Government’ where the department took the lead. Among these is the following commitment:

“To protect low-income families in private rented accommodation and avoid further market rental inflation we will expand access to the Tenancy Sustainment Protocol throughout the country. This scheme, operating in conjunction with Threshold in the Dublin and Cork City areas, has assisted almost 6,000 rent supplement households to date.”

Threshold enjoys a positive working relationship with the Department. Since the establishment of the ITSP Protocol Threshold has referred over 2,900 cases to the Department. As of the end of August 2017 Threshold has 837 active ITSP cases. The Protocol mandates rent uplifts for six months. After the initial six months expires, Threshold staff carry out a review of each individual case. The review involves linking in with both the tenant and the landlord to confirm that the tenancy is still in place and that there are no outstanding issues within the tenancy. After this review is carried out, Threshold will submit an application to the Department requesting that the higher level of rent supplement be continued for a further six month period. Due to the success of this Protocol, Threshold has become the point of contact for clients in receipt of Tenancy Sustainment payments for other issues relating to their tenancy, whether it be notice of terminations or minimum standards breaches. The valuable support and mediation Threshold provides between landlords and a tenant has a positive impact on tenancy sustainment and contributes greatly to homelessness prevention.

Threshold’s Galway Tenancy Protection Service was established in June 2016. The service is funded through Galway City Council, Galway County Council, Mayo County Council and Roscommon County Council. It provides a single point of contact for tenants at risk of

homelessness in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon. A vital part of the service was the establishment of an Interim Tenancy Sustainment Protocol with the Department to allow for increased Rent Supplement payments where tenancies are at risk due to rent increases. The Galway Tenancy Protection Service has developed a strong working relationship with the Department. When issues have arisen in Rent Supplement Tenancies, such as notices of termination being issued, rents being increased and payments being suspended, the Galway TPS has worked closely with Department staff to find solutions that help sustain tenancies. Department staff regularly refer tenants with notices of termination or rent increases to the Galway TPS to establish the validity of such notices.

We enjoy a close working relationship with Citizen's Information Centres (CICs) in the greater Dublin region. We provide training and outreach services on tenancy issues to staff and users of the CICs. The partnerships that we have developed with them and with organisations like the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS), serve as a model of how state bodies and the charity sector can work closely and efficiently to best reach and appropriately serve the most vulnerable in society.

In the current strategy the Department also committed to:

“Increase Rent Supplement and Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) limits by up to 15% taking account of geographic variations in market rents, and extend the roll out by local authorities of the HAP, including the capacity to make discretionary enhanced payments”

We warmly welcomed the announcement in July 2016 that the HAP and Rent Supplement limits were to increase. These increases were substantial and have worked to alleviate some of the issues faced by families and households across the country and have prevented many from entering homelessness. As we witnessed through our frontline services, the increased rent supplement limits, in particular, had a substantial positive impact on people facing economic evictions and the risk of homelessness. The opportunity these new caps brought to households to normalise ‘top-ups’ ensured that rent supplement claimants were not dipping into other social welfare payments to pay rent at the expense of other necessities.

Threshold Pre-Budget Submissions

Threshold submitted detailed pre-budget proposals to the Department of Employment and Social Protection in July 2017. These proposals can be viewed on our website² and a copy has been included with this document.

We called for regular reviews of rent supplement limits to ensure that they do not fall significantly below market rents. One of the biggest barriers for rent supplement recipients in accessing affordable housing is the dearth of supply in rental accommodation which has the effect of keeping rent levels high. The introduction of rent certainty measures in December 2016 was warmly welcomed by Threshold. While the early indications are positive it will take time for market forces to moderate rents. Therefore it is imperative that Rent Supplement (RS) limits are reviewed to protect vulnerable and low income tenants while market rents continue to be unaffordable and out of reach.

We suggested that there is an on-going need for RS. The purpose of RS is to provide short term income support for people living in private rented accommodation who cannot provide for the cost of their accommodation and meet the eligibility criteria. Rent Supplement continues to be the appropriate payment for people under certain circumstances and Threshold strongly urges that rent supplement continue to exist in parallel with the HAP scheme and we suggest that it is not phased out. It has been flagged through our services that some individuals who should be able to apply for rent supplement are being told they have to apply for HAP instead. This is particularly worrying when an individual or family is at risk of homelessness and cannot avail of rent supplement on the ‘substantial change in circumstance’ ground. Quick access to rent supplement under these circumstances is vital for those who could afford the rent at the beginning of their tenancy but find themselves unable to continue to pay the rent because of a substantial change in their circumstances, such as unemployment, during their tenancy.

For many years Threshold has called for reform of the Rent Supplement scheme to meet the realities of the private rented sector. Threshold contends that RS limits should be more targeted, related to submarkets or local housing market areas within each Local Authority

²https://www.threshold.ie/download/pdf/thresholds_2018_prebudget_submission_to_the_department_of_employment_and_social_protection.pdf

area, and more tailored to individual circumstances. Threshold also continues to advocate for the introduction of a range of administrative reform measures that in most cases would cost little to introduce, and would lead to better outcomes for eligible rent supplement tenants who are seeking to secure accommodation. In addition it would increase confidence of landlords in the rent supplement scheme. The proposed measures are summarised in our pre-budget submission.

Strategy 2017- 2020

Threshold supports the Departmental mission statement contained in the 2016-2019 strategy. The promotion of participation and inclusion in society for the most vulnerable should remain the guiding principle of the Department. This is a mission shared by many in Government and the NGO sector, including Threshold.

We suggest that the most efficient way to meet the mission of the Department is to place partnership, across statutory bodies, NGOs and others, at the centre of its operations. Close co-operation between Government Departments and agencies and between Government and the NGO sector is the most efficient and sustainable way to achieve our shared goals, through on-the-ground practice of service providers such as Threshold informing the development and implementation of policies on an ongoing basis.

The housing crisis is not solely a matter for the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, but touches the remit of almost every other Government Department, none more so than the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. The current crisis is unprecedented in terms of its scale and also in terms of its effect on families including those who are headed by adults who are working. It is vital that Government Departments and agencies work closely together to formulate policy responses to the crisis and put their various perspectives and expertise to work in order develop a sustainable solution to the problem.

Beyond Government it is vital that the state engages closely with the charity sector for the benefit of the most vulnerable. The close working relationship between the department and Threshold, for example in the operation of the ITPS, has allowed both organisations to more efficiently carry out their core mission and more effectively deliver services. This

relationship enhances both organisations and facilitates learning to enhance all of our outcomes.