

Opinion & Analysis

Fintan O'Toole

Absence of preparation for opening schools is terrifying



One of the advantages Ireland has in dealing with the pandemic is the ability to see into the future. What is happening in Asia now will happen to us in August or September. And one of the things that is happening there has huge implications for what we will be doing in those months: reopening schools.

Public health policy here has assumed that children don't spread the virus much. But in South Korea, one of the countries that has dealt best with the crisis, evidence has emerged that, while children under 10 were half as likely as adults were to spread Covid-19, children over 10 are "even more likely to infect others than adults were". Opening schools that have been closed

since March 12th is the single most important thing the Government has to do. Children are suffering and the most vulnerable are suffering most. A survey of more than 700 second-level teachers by researchers at Trinity College Dublin found that students in disadvantaged secondary schools are three times more likely to have disengaged from their teachers during the lockdown. The picture is unlikely to be any brighter for primary school kids.

The Government is faced with an excruciating dilemma. There are two absolute imperatives: to control the pandemic and to get children and young people back into the classroom. But it is extremely difficult to do both and the news from South Korea makes it even harder. If kids over 10 are more infective than adults, putting them together indoors in the same rooms for hours on end is no less dangerous than doing the same with grown-ups. If the Dáil can't sit in Leinster House, how can kids sit in a classroom?

Child welfare, social justice and economic recovery on the one side and public health on the other exert equal and opposite pressures. Balancing the different risks demands a massive national effort to reconfigure schoolrooms, to build temporary classrooms and install new toilets, to recruit extra staff for

teaching and cleaning and to provide huge amounts of protective and sanitary equipment. This effort has to be on the same scale as the radical and urgent reorganisation of hospitals at the start of the pandemic.

But there is no sign of any such plan. Schools are due to reopen in just five weeks. In the last week of May, we were told that "a roadmap for the reopening schools from late August will be ready within a fortnight". We still don't have it.

Exceptional

Last Thursday, the new Minister for Education Norma Foley was in the Dáil, presenting her department's annual estimates. Here are her own words. Read them and weep: "I should explain that the revised estimate presented today does not include any provision in relation to Covid-19 at this stage... it is my intention that the exceptional funding requirements of the education and skills sector for this year... will need to be addressed as part of the supplementary estimates process. This will allow a clear picture as to the scale of the investment needed in the sector to ensure that it is adequately funded to respond to the unprecedented challenges that currently exist in our schools..."

So, as of last Thursday evening, the department not only had no budget for the

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radical changes that need to be made in schools, it had, by its own account, no "clear picture" of the scale of investment and action required. If there are no estimates of cost, it can only be because the department has not done the detailed work that would identify what each school needs. In its misnamed Planning for Re-Opening Schools document of June 12th, the department pretty much says this: "It is not feasible, from a cost, sustainability or delivery perspective, to identify and implement the additional classroom capacity (through pre-fabricated units, construction work) across each school."

What does "not feasible" mean in the context of a national emergency? This is

too hard so we're not doing it. Is that it? As of now, Foley and her department can't tell the parents of a million children how the school day will work, how many hours or days children will attend, where the extra space will be, what will happen with PPE and sanitation, what immunocompromised children, parents or teachers are supposed to do, how transport will operate, or what happens after a pupil or teacher tests positive.

This is, frankly, terrifying. The underlying condition of Irish education is the history of church control that makes schools private entities. We saw what happened in March and April in an analogous situation – privately-owned nursing homes were left to their own devices with lethal results. Are we about to do this again with schools?

Vanished

Scariest of all is this simple sentence from Foley last week: "I am absolutely committed to the goal of reopening our primary and post-primary schools as normal at the end of the summer." As normal – can there be two more dangerously deluded words? It is, literally, old-school thinking. We can't send our children back into a world that has vanished. The Government seems to be leading us into a great national test without having done its homework. The results cannot be good.



Covid-19 must not derail better care for the elderly



Suzanne Cahill Opinion

We must evolve from nursing homes model to cost-effective alternatives in the home

Much has been written and spoken about residential care for older people in Ireland since the first outbreak of Covid-19 on February 29th. There has also been some public outcry about the excessive number of Covid-related deaths in nursing homes and calls for inquiries into such tragedies. Factors identified as responsible include: the Government's initial, almost exclusive focus on hospitals and on the discharge from hospitals to nursing homes of frail, older people not tested for Covid-19; the asymptomatic spread of the infection within nursing homes; lack of personal protective equipment and oxygen supply; a recruitment drive by the Health Service Executive which probably caused staff shortages in the private and voluntary sector; and environmental factors such as congregate living.

Repeatedly, in discussions about what went terribly wrong, experts have pointed to the need for a continuum of care and for new models of nursing home care to be introduced in Ireland, such as the Eden Alternative or the green house model. There is nothing that new about these models or indeed recommendations for

their introduction. Several have been in existence across Europe since the late 1980s.

In 1987, Denmark passed new legislation suspending all institutional care for older people and in 1992, in Sweden, residential care was replaced with special housing in various forms. Since the 1990s, the Netherlands has also blazed a trail, providing its frail, older people, including those with dementia, with a suite of different accommodation options. In 2010, the Dutch government launched an ambitious programme for aged care facilities, worth €80 million, focusing on small-scale domestic dwellings, choice, autonomy, meaningful activities, preservation of personhood and facilitative relationships.

'Home' and nursing

Over the past decade, seminars have been hosted in Ireland where international experts have shared knowledge and expertise demonstrating how their countries have successfully reformed policy by re-engineering the organisational structure of care homes and by bringing "home" into nursing homes.

As far back as 2010, Athena McLean, author of the book *A Study of Nursing Home Care in the US*, gave a public seminar in TCD on the green house model, its philosophy of care, clinical leadership with multi-disciplinary input. Sadly, over the years, much of this effort to recalibrate nursing home care in Ireland has failed, as investors continue to build large-scale facilities outside cities and towns, leaving many frail older people socially marooned and disconnected from friends, families and communities.

But finally, politicians had begun to listen and acknowledge the need for change. The impetus for this change had already commenced before Covid-19. In early 2019, the government published an important policy statement addressing a range of housing options for older people and around the same time commissioned another report on the continuum of care

for people with dementia. Reports are a useful way for politicians to demonstrate they are taking action but often nothing happens until a crisis occurs.

And now a crisis has occurred and the Government's initial response has been to establish a nursing home panel to examine best-practice measures regarding Covid-19. Noteworthy here are the terms of reference for this inquiry and the focus on safeguarding older people. Noteworthy too is the panel composition, with no allied health service professional on board, no nursing home resident, representative or family caregiver. Also given that the side effects of Covid-19 – such as loneliness, isolation, anxiety and depression – may be as harmful as the infection itself, it is noteworthy that no clinical psychologist

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sits on this panel. And given that up to three-quarters of older people in long-term care probably have dementia, it is striking that there is no dementia expert on the panel.

A cynic might question the real purpose of this inquiry especially when experts have already identified those factors believed to have contributed to the crisis. A careful read of the lengthy transcript from the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 hearing of May 26th tells the

■ Experts have pointed to the need for a continuum of care and for new models of nursing home care to be introduced in Ireland. PHOTOGRAPH: PA

whole albeit extremely tragic story.

These are extremely challenging times. While a nursing home review may be necessary, there is a danger now that its narrow and strongly bio-medical focus will take the spotlight off other broader unfinished initiatives, currently under way on the Irish aged-care landscape.

For example, we have a visionary piece of legislation, the Assisted Decision-Making Capacity Act, that has the potential to improve quality of life for many people whose capacity is compromised, as it enshrines a legal right to autonomy. Although first enacted five years ago, the legislation is still not widely implemented. We have a national dementia strategy about to expire, with no commitment made for its renewal and no ring-fenced funding allocated to progress the good work already under way. We have legislation entitling older people to live in nursing homes but no similar legislation enabling them to live at home with homecare supports. A new statutory home care given that was to be trialled this year but is still not widely implemented. It is unlikely to proceed.

The Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated that, more than ever before, there is an urgent need for good political leadership in older people's services in Ireland and for a shift in the balance of care away from nursing home models towards alternate potentially cost-effective approaches. Greater emphasis must also be placed on home adaptation, universal design, and technological solutions to enable older people live well in their own homes. We cannot afford to let Covid-19 set the clock back.

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Low-wage poverty injustice exposed by coronavirus



Carmel Heaney Rite & Reason

Value of cleaners, supermarket packers, and storekeepers emerged in pandemic

Pope Francis, in a recent address, referred to "a pandemic of poverty" throughout the world. Almost 15 per cent of the world's population live in extreme poverty – on less than \$1.90 a day, according to the World Bank.

In the case of Ireland, it is estimated there were 689,000 people living in poverty in 2019, an increase of 36,000 on 2018 figures. Poverty, as defined by the Central Statistics Office, is having to live on less than 60 per cent of median income, or below €43 per day.

At the same time, the wealth level of the general population worldwide has been rising. Real income, as well as gross domestic product per capita, has increased worldwide since the turn of the century.

This happened within the globalised capitalist economic system. Ireland morphed from high unemployment, mass emigration and capital flight in the depressed 1980s to the 2019/2020 (pre-pandemic) position of fourth-wealthiest country in the OECD and among the wealthiest in the EU (GDP per capita rankings).

This was effected largely by becoming a services trading nation which in turn was made possible by the globalised technological revolution. So is this capitalist system, which has served the majority so well, capable of extending its benefits to those living in poverty? This is a question exercising the minds of many in the worlds of economics, business and banking as well as among social justice activists.

Justice v charity

At the 2019 World Economic Forum in Davos, the subject "Ethical Capitalism – Worth a Try?" was on the agenda. Pope Francis addressed the Davos meeting in support of a more inclusive world economic order, carrying on the social justice mission of the Catholic Church.

His predecessor, Benedict XVI, published the encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (Love in Truth), on the eve of the 2009 G8 Summit. In it he affirmed that "justice is inseparable from charity... The truth of development consists in its completeness. If it does not involve the whole man and every man, it is not true development".

Churchmen of other faiths have spoken similarly. Former archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams brought social justice into the public

square, arguing for a shift from a construct of a global economy to one of a global society.

Ethical capitalism has been put into practice in several instances recently. An example is Acumen, a non-profit global venture capital fund with the aim of using an entrepreneurial approach in reducing poverty, giving the poor a chance to invest in skills and local resources rather than depend on aid.

The Grameen Bank of Bangladesh provides credit to the poorest of the poor thereby empowering them to achieve productive lives.

Those without adequate food or shelter cannot wait for the shift to a world order based on social justice. Social spending by governments via public housing and welfare payments must continue.

The fact that such subsidies are inadequate is evidenced by the gap filled by non-governmental agencies, often motivated by religion, such as the Salvation Army and the Society of St Vincent de Paul in our part of the world.

While such relief agencies are necessary, other causes of poverty and its complexity must be addressed. In some Third World countries, poor governance is a factor. There are a variety of causes at home,



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including addiction and violence.

Poverty can be chronic, from one generation to the next, in which case education of the young could be an escape route. Poverty can happen almost overnight when a home is lost because there is no money to pay the mortgage. It can happen suddenly when a business fails. In such cases, access to credit is a factor.

An aspect of poverty which has surfaced during the pandemic is low-wages poverty. Providing services for victims and the public involved not only doctors and nurses but cleaners, supermarket packers and storekeepers.

At one point it was noted that the pandemic unemployment benefit was more than some of these workers were paid ordinarily. That was a wake-up call suggesting that we consider the value we place on low-skilled but necessary work. Adjusting the wage differential affecting such workers might be a step towards reducing poverty in our society.

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