

HOUSING IN DUBLIN.

REPORT OF COMMITTEE ON CONTROL AND IMPROVEMENT OF TENEMENT HOUSES.

[Read March 27th, 1914].

The improvement of the Housing Conditions of the working classes in Dublin, dealt with in the Report of the Departmental Committee of the Local Government Board for Ireland, can be effected in two ways—(1) improving and better regulating existing houses, which are capable of being put in good repair, and by closing, and, if necessary, demolishing, houses which are, or are becoming, unfit for human habitation; and (2) by building new houses to accommodate those who have been or will be dispossessed from existing houses.

This Report has been prepared without waiting for the publication of the evidence taken by the Committee of the Local Government Board, and we defer the consideration of any Schemes for building New Dwellings until the full Report with Evidence, Appendix, and Maps, is available.

TENEMENT HOUSES.

The vast majority of existing houses occupied by the working classes consist of what are called "Tenement Houses," that is to say, houses intended and originally used for occupation by one family, but which, owing to changes of circumstances, have been let out room by room, and are now occupied by separate families, one in each room for the most part.

As regards those tenement houses, we make the following suggestions, some of which cannot be effected without legislation.

LICENCE.

As matters stand, there appears to be a difficulty in deciding what constitutes a tenement house, see Report,

p. 29, where it is stated that the powers of the Corporation cannot be used till the house has been occupied as a tenement house.

The obvious remedy is that such a house should not be permitted to be occupied unless licensed.

Each house should be licensed by the Corporation, the licence to be for one year, to be granted and renewed on such terms and conditions as the Corporation may think fit: This was proposed by the Corporation Bill of 1908, section 15, and is recommended in the Report, p. 28, with this limitation, that it should not come into force for five years in respect to existing houses. We see no reason why it should not come into force sooner, if the conditions are not too stringent.

A penalty should be imposed for using the house without a licence (Corporation Bill, s. 15).

An appeal should be given to the Recorder from the refusal of the Corporation to grant or renew a licence (Corporation Bill, s. 15).

CARETAKER.

If the landlord does not reside in the house there should be compulsorily a caretaker or other responsible person residing in the house and having charge of it.

The presence of a caretaker would prevent wilful damage by tenants, and tend to produce compliance with the Bye-laws, especially as to cleaning the stairs and passages, overcrowding in the rooms, and notification of infectious disease, and if the hall-doors were closed at night, and light provided in the hall, stairs and passages, the evils which are referred to in the report would be checked.

It is stated there on page 4 that:—"The front door is often left open all day and all night," and on page 5—that witnesses, including the clergy, have testified that—"The constantly open doors and the want of lighting in the halls and passages at night are responsible for much immorality."

WATER SUPPLY AND SANITARY ACCOMMODATION.

There should be a water tap and a sink to carry away dirty water on every floor.

The Bye-law No. 11 provides for privy accommodation so that the number of water closets or privies in relation to the greatest number of persons who, subject to the restrictions imposed by any bye-law in that behalf, may, at

any one time, occupy rooms in the house as sleeping apartments, shall be in the proportion of not less than one water closet or privy to each twelve persons.

This provision, which is also in the Liverpool Bye-laws, is, we understand, not enforced by the Sanitary Authorities as it should be, and we doubt if it is adequate.

The water closets are generally in the yard. There should be at least one in the house, if not one on every floor.

These provisions for water supply and sanitary accommodation should be made conditions for the granting and renewal of the licence.

SANITARY CONVENIENCES USED IN COMMON.

By s. 21 of the Public Health Amendment Act, 1890, if sanitary conveniences are used in common by the occupiers of two or more separate dwellinghouses, or by other persons, each of those persons may be held liable for the proper condition of the sanitary conveniences. It was objected that this does not provide for the case of a single dwellinghouse. The Corporation, in their Bill of 1908, proposed to remedy this, and s. 17 enacted that "the provisions of s. 21 of the Public Health Amendment Act, 1890, should extend and apply to any sanitary conveniences used in common by the occupiers of two or more dwellings situate in any one tenement house." We approve of this suggestion.

WASHING AND DRYING.

It is very desirable that space should be provided in the house for washing and drying clothes. We suggest that this should be provided in the basement, or yard, and that residence in the basement should be prohibited.

This has been done by the Alexandra Guild in Grenville Street, but it was found that the women were very slow to avail themselves of it.

COOKING APPLIANCES.

Good cooking is essential to health, and badly fed men and women cannot work properly. The small open bedroom grates in the upper rooms in tenement houses are quite unfit for cooking meals, however simple, and waste much coal. We suggest that where the ordinary grates in living rooms are not suited for cooking purposes, small open ranges or stoves should be provided. They are not by any means expensive, about £3 15s., including fixing.

REGISTRATION OF TENEMENT HOUSES AND ENFORCEMENT OF BYE-LAWS.

The registration of Tenement Houses prescribed by the Dublin Corporation Act, 1890, s. 29, should be strictly enforced, and the register should be open to the inspection of ratepayers.

The Bye-laws should be strictly enforced, and the provisions of them against overcrowding should be supplemented by posting in each room a Notice specifying the number of persons allowed to inhabit it. Defacing or removing the notice should be prohibited.

Such a notice is prescribed in the case of common lodging-houses by the Bye-laws in force in Dublin and Liverpool, and there seems no reason why it should not be done in the case of tenement houses. The Bye-laws, which, the Report states, have not been enforced as they should be, were made in 1902. They were repealed by the Corporation on July 25th, 1913, and new Bye-laws substituted, which were confirmed by the Local Government Board on November 26th, 1913. The Report does not refer to these new Bye-laws. They are the same as the old Bye-laws, with certain alterations, which were apparently made to meet decisions of the Divisional Magistrates. No. 41 requires that no proceedings are to be taken against a landlord for breach of a Bye-law until he has had notice of the complaint, and has failed to remedy it. This provision occurs in the Liverpool Bye-laws, and the absence of it was held by Mr. Swifte in 1910, following a decision in England (*Nokes v. Islington Corporation* (1904), 1 Q.B. 610, 615), to make Bye-law No. 28 of the Bye-laws of 1902 (requiring the landlord to clean the stairs and passages) unreasonable and bad.

Another alteration is the introduction of the words, "where the landlord has the right of access" to the house or room, limiting his liability to such cases. We do not know if this alteration was made in consequence of some decision, but it seems strange that a landlord of a tenement house could deprive himself of the right of access to any part of it, and plead that as a good defence. If the system of licence we have suggested be adopted, the licensee will be responsible for the condition of the premises, and notice of defects should be served on him or on the caretaker, and should specify a particular date for the removal of the defect complained of.

The Liverpool Bye-laws are similar to the Dublin Bye-laws, save that they provide for greater cubic space for each individual, and for the separation of the sexes.

PUTTING HOUSES IN REPAIR.

The Report shows that most of the tenement houses have been allowed to go out of repair, and the difficulty is how to get the owners to put them in repair. The Corporation have no power to interfere unless the want of repair is such as to make the house unsanitary, dangerous, or unfit for habitation. If the system of licensing is adopted, it could be made a condition that the house first should be put in proper repair, and the caretaker would then be responsible for its proper maintenance. Apart from that, something can be done if the owners of houses who hold them under lease, as nearly all do in Dublin, recognised their liability under the covenant in the lease to keep the house in repair, or if the head landlords, their lessors, threatened them with legal proceedings for breach of the covenant to repair, and took proceedings if they refused to comply with the covenant.

Lessors are, as a rule, satisfied with payment of their rents, and there are, no doubt, difficulties in the way of legal proceedings, firstly, in ascertaining who is assignee of the lease, and secondly, as the lessor is only entitled to damages for the injury to his reversion, such damage would be small, unless the lease had only a few years to run.

ACQUISITION OF TENEMENT HOUSES BY THE CORPORATION OR BY COMPANIES OR INDIVIDUALS.

Sir Charles Cameron, in his Report on the state of Public Health in Dublin for 1912, p. 107, is of opinion that the Corporation should acquire and remodel tenement houses such as those in Gardiner Street, and let them in flats, and thinks that they could do so without loss. We agree with his opinion. If tenement houses can be acquired and carried on without a loss by such bodies as the Alexandra Guild Tenements' Company, the Social Service Tenements' Company, and the Association for the Housing of the Very Poor, there is no reason why there should be a loss in the case of the Corporation. We would go further, and say that, inasmuch as it will not be practicable (even if it were advisable) to erect new dwellings for all those requiring new accommodation, which, reckoning on replacing one-half of the second-class houses and all the third, amounts to fresh quarters for 41,477 persons (see Report, p. 3 (8)), it would be desirable that the Corporation

should acquire empty houses in fair structural condition, and fit them up as tenement houses. The Corporation appears to have these powers under the Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890, and the Act of 1908, s. 7, enables them to acquire or establish lodging-houses for the working classes (which include separate houses or cottages for the working classes, whether containing one or several tenements) outside their district, with the consent of the Local Government Board and of the local authority within which it is proposed to acquire or establish lodging-houses. It is noted, however, in the Report, p. 19 (49), that none of the purely building or housing Companies, except the Artizans' Dwellings' Company, which was exceptionally circumstanced, were able to pay a commercial dividend, although in some cases they had little or no management expenses.

Still we agree with Sir Charles Cameron (Report for 1912, p. 143), that it would be a great boon if the example of the Alexandra Guild were followed by other bodies. If even one model tenement house was established in every parish, much good would be done.