

“We are devastated and feel alone in this world with no one to help us”

Anne O Hare



John and Tessa Donoghue, from Saintfield, Co Down, with their twelve children.

One of the largest families in Northern Ireland have received news that they are to be evicted from their home amid the worst public health crisis to hit the UK and Ireland in living memory.

John and Tessa Donoghue, from Saintfield, Co Down, who recently welcomed their twelfth child Molly into the world on New Years Day, say they are devastated their landlord has told them they must leave their home by June.

The family, who are already making-do living in a three-bedroom bungalow, are upset they have to move house again.

The Donoghues say they have moved ten times in the last 12 years as the Housing Executive struggles to find a property big enough for them all.

While new measures came into force in England and Wales to stop landlords from evicting tenants for three months – a measure announced by the Communities Minister in Northern Ireland, stopped short of introducing a similar move.

With the world virtually in lockdown due to the Coronavirus pandemic John (43), says society is growing evermore intolerant of large families like his.

Amid the panic buying phenomena of recent weeks he describes that during a regular shopping trip to his local shop, an assistant told him he wasn't allowed to purchase as many packs of nappies as he had taken from the shelves.

“While this may seem like a particularly funny incident to

many, I can assure you its just one of many scenes which my wife and I encounter each day,” he said.

“We have three children in nappies so you can imagine how many nappies we go through.

“Before panic buying became a normality, our average weekly shopping trolley looked liked something from supermarket sweep.”

Just being together these days may seem like the Donoghues are contravening new emergency legislation as their big family could be considered a mass gathering.

In the midst of her anxiety, Tessa (35), cradles a contented and smiling Molly who is fast asleep in her mothers arms clearly oblivious to the fuss.

Tessa laughs at the idea of policing social distancing in their home. She added: "Saying good night in our household sounds more like a classroom roll call. Our eldest daughter, is also called Tessa. She is 15 and is a great help to me.

"Then there is Bobby, (14), John (9), Savannah (8), Joseph (7), Sinead (6), Shannon (5), Ronnie (4), Reggie, (3), Tommy (2), Clarice (1) and little Molly whose four-months old.

Tessa says she can't wait to hear the cry of another new born baby and hold it in her arms and that's what drives the couple to become one of the largest families in Northern Ireland.

Tessa says the family have nowhere else to go and it is evident that the constant cycle of having to uproot the children time and time again is having an impact on both her and the children's emotional well being.

She said: "We have approached a local MLA to see if he can help us and as yet we are still waiting on him to do something.

"I am desperate to find our 'forever home' – a house big enough for us all with room for the children to run around outside.

In a recent GoFundMe page Tessa set up to help raise money to buy a home for them all, she said: "Our landlord gave us notice to move because he is selling the house.

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A local SDLP MLA, Colin McGrath responded to the family's crisis for this article. He said: "It is essential that people know that regardless of the make-up of their family that should they require assistance, the state will offer what support it can. This support should

not be restrictive, prohibitive or bureaucratic."

His statement added: "We are in the midst of a crisis with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. When this crisis has passed and is but a memory, it will fall upon each of us to be a part of picking up the pieces of the past and rebuilding.

"We have the opportunity - in fact it will be the responsibility of all - to create a better society for all our children."

The statement ended with the irony: "This is something none of us can shirk. Let us continue that noble endeavour of creating communities where all are valued, afforded their dignity, and offered a place to call home."

The Donoghue family have applied to the BBC1 programme, DIY SOS – Big Build, for help to build their own 'forever' home.

Prayer in Times of Plagues and Epidemics

Almighty God, who forgive the sins of your people and heal all their faults, you who call the Lord our healer and sent your beloved Son to bear our sickness, look upon us who stand humbly before You.

We pray to You in this time of plague and need, remember Your love and kindness that You have always shown to Your people in times of tribulation. Just as You graciously looked upon Aaron's atonement and stopped the plague that broke out, just as You accepted David's sacrifice and commanded the destroying angel to withdraw his hand, accept also today our prayer and sacrifice and show us mercy.

Keep this disease away from us, allow those affected to be healed, protect those who have been preserved from it so far by Your goodness, and do not let the plague spread any further. Amen.